

tea SOLDIER (11) REICH TANK

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At 19

At 19

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He was called "the fearless knight of the Reich."

He was hailed as the best tank ace of World War II.

He was extolled by Goebbels propaganda.

Legends told of his exploits.

Until now, Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann is considered the most productive tanker in history — according to official data, in three years he destroyed 138 enemy tanks and 132 artillery pieces.

However, many details of his real biography are still unknown. Only one successful battle of Wittmann has been accurately documented, near Villiers-Bocham on June 13, 1944, when his "Tiger" defeated a British column, knocking out about 20 enemy tanks and armored vehicles in a matter of minutes. The circumstances of Wittmann's death are not fully clarified either - there are several mutually exclusive versions of his death. For almost 40 years, its crew was considered missing - the remains were discovered and identified only in 1983...

This book is the first Russian biography of the famous tank ace, a detailed account of his battle path from a simple artilleryman to a commander of a heavy tank company. Having studied all the available literature, having analyzed conflicting information and testimonies of eyewitnesses, having reviewed the list of battles and victories, the author exposes numerous myths about "the best tanker of all times and peoples", formed during Wittmann's lifetime and surrounding his name after his death, up to our days.

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FOREWORD

With some certainty, we can say that the Second World War was a tank war. In this regard, it is noteworthy that in the domestic literature, in fact, no attention was paid to

attention to the thirteen heavy tank battalions of the Waffen-SS, which for a long time for the German command were a kind of tactical panacea, which was used in all critical situations. They were actively used in the winter of 1943 near Kharkov, in the summer of 1943 during the Battle of Kursk, which for the Germans is better known as Operation Citadel, in late autumn - in the winter of the same 1943 near Kiev, Zhitomir, Cherkassy, in the summer of 1944 on the section of the Western Front between Caen and Falaise, in December 1944 in the Ardennes, at the beginning of 1945 in Hungary and Austria. Of all these tactical units, special attention should be paid to the 501st Waffen-SS heavy tank battalion, which included one of the most famous tankmen of the Second World War, Michael Wittmann.

If you look at the career of this tanker, his abilities, tactical instinct, then without any exaggeration Wittmann can be called the most successful tank officer. He fought in this battalion from the very moment of its inception until the moment of his death on August 8, 1944, when Michael Wittmann became the commander of this unit. If you look

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Michael Wittmann with his crew. From left to right: radio operator Werner Yrragng, pointer - Bobby Woll, Michael Wittmann, loader - Rolf Rösner, driver Eugen Schmidt

to the composition of the 501st (later renamed the 101st) heavy tank battalion, you can see that the majority of young people born in 1923-1925 served in it. This generation did not have time to take part in the First World War, but it remembered very well how their grandfathers fought in 1870-1871 against the French at Sedan and Mars-la-Tour, and their fathers shed blood in the forests of Argon, Flanders and near Verdun. German military superiority during the campaign against Poland in 1939, Belgium and France in 1941 and the aggression in the Balkans in 1941 was predetermined by the then revolutionary tactics of using panzer divisions. Instead of using tanks as a traditional type of weapon designed to support infantry, the German command decided to use them as independent offensive units, which made it possible to almost instantly penetrate into enemy positions, for

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taking him by surprise. Tank wedges, supported from the air by the forces of the Luftwaffe, and on the ground by motorized infantry, for several years were the key to Germany's military success.

The situation changed radically in the summer of 1941, when Germany invaded the territory of the Soviet Union. Here, the German armed forces had to face the Soviet tanks KV-1 and T-34, which surpassed the German vehicles in a number of indicators. Soviet tanks had thicker armor, more powerful engines, and the guns allowed them to fire over longer distances. The German command was in considerable perplexity when it turned out that the 75-mm short-barreled gun of the RGU medium tank was actually unable to penetrate the frontal armor of the Soviet KV-1 tanks! and KV-2. At the same time, the 76.2-mm gun of the T-34 tank surpassed the German tank guns not only in terms of firing range, but also in terms of the penetrating power of the projectile. As a result, the tactical successes of the German tankers at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War were by no means explained by the technical and tactical lag of Soviet military equipment, but by the higher combat skills of the Germans, who, in addition to constant training, had several successful military operations behind them.

The German command did not disregard the fact that the German tanks lagged behind the Soviet ones. Action was taken almost immediately. The short-barreled cannon of the R71U medium tank was replaced by a long-barreled 75-millimeter gun, which not only made it possible to conduct aimed fire, but also significantly increased the armor-piercing of shells. However, the fact

remained a fact: the German army needed a heavier tank with a more powerful gun, with thicker armor and a stronger engine that would make it possible to cope with the Russian impassability.

Attempts to create a heavy tank in Germany were

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undertaken back in 1937, but then the work stalled. They were resumed only at the beginning of 1941. The creation of a prototype heavy tank was entrusted to Henschel & Son. However, the presented samples did not meet the requirements imposed on them. As a result, at the beginning of 1941, several firms (Henschel, Mann, Daimler-Benz, Porsche) were commissioned to create several models of a 30-ton tank, which were to be armed with 75-millimeter tank guns 124 , [48 (long-barreled), as well as a 105 mm gun 1.28. At a conference held at his country residence in the Berghof (Obersalzberg), Hitler told the officers and industry representatives present that the new tank model was supposed to have a more powerful weapon along with thick armor. "We must create vehicles that, firstly, have better penetration power compared to enemy tanks, secondly, have heavier armor, and thirdly, must reach speeds of up to 40 kilometers per hour!"

The future tank should have 10 cm frontal armor and 6 cm side armor. The Henschel company planned to install an experimental gun on the tank turret, while Porsche chose to make do with the proven 88mm cannon. As a result, the project to create a tank under the code name UK 3001 was transformed into the creation of a tank UK 4501. The name "tiger" arose somewhat later. The tradition of applying the names of predatory animals to German armored vehicles continues to this day. The "tiger" and "panther" were followed by the "marten" ("Marder"), and the "cheetah", "lynx" ("Lukhs") and the most famous tank of the FRG, the "leopard", were already in the service of the Bundeswehr.

At the Henschel plant in Kassel, the development and production of the Tiger tank became the top priority project. Under the direct supervision of von Heiking, whom Oscar Henschel called nothing else

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"Tiger" in the field exercises

as "commissar for the production of the tiger", by April 20, 1942, the first prototype of the new tank was completed. Its length was 4.93 meters and its weight was 1310 kilograms. The prototype was equipped with an 88 mm gun. The increase in the weight of the tank forced to increase the track width by almost a third - from 52 to 72.5 centimeters. And this meant that the "Tiger" could not be transported on standard railway platforms. As a result, the Reichsbahn (imperial railway) was forced to purchase 27 special flat wagons, which were intended for the transport of goods weighing over 82 tons. In addition, the new tank model had to be equipped with special narrow tracks, which were replaced with standard (wide) ones after unloading from the platform.

On Hitler's birthday, April 20, 1942, prototypes of tanks developed by Henschel and Porsche were shown to the Fuhrer in his Headquarters "Wolfschanze". Hitler was pleased with their testing, despite the fact that all the presented samples of tanks had certain shortcomings and shortcomings. Not

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Paying attention to a significant number of flaws, Hitler initially preferred the Porsche model. However, the final decision as to which of the companies will produce Tiger tanks in the future has been postponed. Imperial Minister

Albert Speer planned to involve Colonel Thomale, who was awarded the Knight's Cross, to test the presented samples. It was the colonel who had to make his verdict, which of the presented samples was more promising. In May 1942, several samples of the "Tigers" "Porsche" and "Henschel" were sent to the next test. The expert commission was headed by Colonel Thomale and Professor Heberan. Thomale, as an experienced tanker, had to evaluate the "tigers" from a military point of view, and Professor Eberan, a teacher at the Dresden University of Technology, had to examine the vehicles for their subsequent technical improvement. |

After numerous tests, the commission unanimously spoke in favor of the Henschel samples. One of the decisive factors in making such a decision was the ease of operation and maintenance of the Henschel samples. "Gigr" "Porsche" was equipped with a new model of electric drive, which was very difficult to repair in combat conditions. Colonel Thomale personally informed Hitler about the assessments made by the expert commission. As a result, it was the Henschel company that received a lucrative contract for the production of the Tiger. But you should not assume that all the components of the "tiger" were produced in Kassel at the Henschel factories. The engine and transmission of the OS 4 C 1216 were supplied by Maybach, the caterpillars were supplied by the Reacher-Moorburg enterprise, the brakes were supplied by the Süddeutsche Argus enterprise, the guns and the turret came from the Krupp factories, the machine-gun ball mount came from Daimler-Benz, optical instruments were manufactured by Alkett (Berlin).

## Chapter 1 "LEIBSTANDART"

The creation of heavy tank battalions for the special SS armored corps was planned as early as 1942. But this idea was put to rest in December 1942. As a result, each of the divisions of the tank corps: "Leibstandarte", "Reich" and "Dead Head" received one company of heavy tanks. The organization of these companies was somewhat different from the traditional units. Initially, each Tiger company was to include a platoon of medium tanks, with the task of covering heavy vehicles from being hit by enemy fire at close range.

As the SS Panzer Corps expanded further, independent tank battalions were formed from the "Tigers", which became permanent units of the SS Panzer Corps. The heavy tank companies that were part of the divisions "Leibstandarte" and "Reich" were withdrawn from the subordination of the corresponding armored regiments and became independent units, respectively [and P of the SS tank corps. Heavy tank battalions already appeared in the III SS Panzer Corps by the middle of the Second World War, but within the framework of the SS Panzer Corps (SS divisions "Totenkopf" and "Viking"), their formation did not end even by the end of the war. Until 1945, as part of the SS division "Dead Head" continued to remain

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"Tiger" in motion

only a company of heavy tanks. which was not an independent division, but subordinated to the command of the regiment.

The 4th company of the armored regiment of the SS division "Leibstandarte" received tiger tanks at its disposal at the beginning of 1943. Around January 1943, the first heavy tanks began to enter service with the P Division of the SS Panzer Corps, commanded by Paul Hausser.

If you look at the combat path of the elite unit of the Waffen-SS - "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler", then it took part in the campaign against Poland, in the capture of Holland, Belgium, France, the Balkan campaign, aggression against the USSR. But at the same time, it should be noted that since the summer of 1942, the Leibstandarte has been something like a reinforced regiment, or, more correctly, an SS brigade.

The first expansion awaited the Leibstandarte during the fighting in France, when in its

composition according to

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their own anti-tank, anti-aircraft artillery and sapper units appeared. By the end of the French campaign, the Leibstandarte, among other things, had a battery of assault guns (self-propelled artillery mounts), artillery and reconnaissance battalions. On the eve of the invasion of the USSR, a fourth infantry battalion was added to the Leibstandarte. When Operation Barbarossa began, Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich had under his command four infantry battalions, a battalion armed with light and heavy field guns, and an anti-tank battalion, which was equipped with 50 mm guns. In addition, under his command were the Schoenberger battalion, a company of self-propelled 47 mm anti-tank guns, a battery of assault guns, a battalion of light anti-aircraft artillery and an artillery regiment, which was equipped with two reinforced battalions. It is seen. that by June 22, 1941, the Leibstandarte was equal in strength to a reinforced regiment. By this time, the Leibstandarte had an almost legendary reputation and was (albeit not quite officially) proclaimed the main military unit of the German Reich. At the same time, there was a tendency to entrust the Leibstandarte with tasks that were usually assigned to divisions. The myth about the "Leibstandarte", which gradually formed around this military unit, is not

SS Oberstgruppenführer, Colonel General of the Waffen-SS, gave no practical command of the Leibstandarte

sky advantages. From the time of Adolf Hitler" Sepp Dietrich

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at times in difficult conditions, the command had to confirm the reputation of the Leibstandarte as the most combat-ready unit. As a result, almost always it was associated with extremely large losses in personnel. At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, the only armored unit in the Leibstandarte was a battery of assault guns.

Plans for enlargement and reinforcement found the Leibstandarte already on the Eastern Front. For almost the entire winter of 1941, the Leibstandarte occupied positions near Sambek. In February 1942, the formation of a tank battalion began in the town of Wildflecken. The personnel in this battalion was recruited from a variety of training and reserve units. Initially, the command of the three tank companies and the headquarters company was carried out by SS-Sturmbannführer Mohncke. However, Monke soon fell seriously ill, after which Sturmbannführer Schoenberger took command of the battalion. At that time, the tank companies of the "Leibstandarte" were armed with medium-sized RNU tanks equipped with a short-barreled 75-millimeter gun.

The formation of the battalion, which was now carried out in a special camp near Haustenbeck, was completed in June 1942. Almost immediately, the Leibstandarte tank battalion was sent by rail to the Eastern Front to rejoin the main forces of the military unit. The unloading of echelons with equipment took place in Stalino, where two infantry regiments were already being created at full steam. The basis for them should have been the allotted

Leningrad Front 5th battalion, and the newly formed 6th infantry battalion. But in the same June 1942, the Leibstandarte in full force was again loaded into trains and sent to France. It was there that it was to be transformed into the Panzergrenadier Division Leibstandarte. Almost all divisions were increased by an order of magnitude. So, in

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An anti-tank battalion and a battalion of assault guns arose in the Leibstandarte, and the already existing anti-aircraft artillery battalion was expanded to six batteries, and the artillery battalions became four. As part of the infantry regiments, special units were created: reconnaissance, sapper and anti-tank companies, etc. By the time the Leibstandarte took part in the Battle of Kharkov on the Eastern Front, both of its panzergrenadier regiments had the highest strength: one consisted of twenty companies, and the second of nineteen.

In the autumn of 1942, the 3rd battalion of the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment was converted into a motorized infantry battalion and was fully equipped with armored personnel carriers. At the same time, a tank battalion was being formed in Evreux. The tank battalion that already existed at that time became the 2nd battalion of the Leibstandarte tank regiment. According to this, there was also a change in the numbering of tank companies. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd tank companies became the 5th, 6th and 7th, respectively. The 1st Tank Battalion was commanded by SS-Sturmbannführer Max Wünsche, and the 2nd Tank Battalion was commanded by SS-Hauptsturmführer Martin Gross. The command of the tank regiment "Leibstandarte" was entrusted to Sturmbannführer Schoenberger. Each of the tank battalions consisted of three tank companies and a headquarters company.

At the same time, plans are resurfacing to combine the three Panzers.

SS Oberstgruppenführer SS Grenadier Divisions and Colonel General of the Waffen-SS  
("Leibstandarte", "Reich" - Paul Hausser

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and "Dead Head") into a single tank corps of the Waffen-SS, which was to be commanded by Paul Hausser. As part of a single SS tank corps, the existence of an independent heavy tank battalion was already envisaged. Its formation began in the fall of 1942 in Fallingbistel (Germany). It was this battalion that was supposed to be the very first armed with a new German tank at that time - the "Tiger". It was assumed that each of the three SS divisions would allocate personnel from its composition to create three tank companies (one division - one company). However, in practice, only the second tank company had a commander - Hauptsturmführer Herbert Kuhlmann. The creation of an independent corps heavy tank battalion was once again postponed. As a result, each of the three divisions received its own heavy tank company, equipped with Tigers. Thus, in November 1942, the first heavy Tiger tanks appeared in the Leibstandarte.

On October 15, 1942, the SS Main Operations Directorate issued an order "On the formation of a heavy tank company of a tank regiment of the SS division "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler". Initially planned as the 1st company of a separate heavy tank battalion of the Waffen-SS tank corps with the postal code 03828, this company was transferred to the Leibstandarte. Now her military postal code was 48165.

The place of its final staffing was to be the town of Evreux (Normandy), already mentioned above, where the Leibstandarte tank regiment was stationed. However, the heavy tank company itself, which had already begun to form, was still located in Fallingbistel, and, therefore, was quite remote from both the regiment and the location of the division itself. As a result, the team

The Leibstandarte was supposed to provide personnel for the composition of the company, which by that time mostly existed only on paper. main opera

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The SS administration had to approve the replacements. It was not only about the officers. The division had to pick up non-commissioned officers and privates for the new company. As a result, the composition of a heavy tank company was formed not only from the employees of a tank regiment, but also from an assault gun battalion, as well as an SS training tank battalion. SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling, awarded the Knight's Cross for Christmas 1942

heavy tank company

The Leibstandarte was placed under the command of SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling. Heinz Kling was born in Kassel on September 10, 1913. On August 27, 1935, he entered the service in the 7th company of the SS regiment "Germany", which was based in Arlosen. A little later, Kling studied at the SS Junker School in Bad Tölz. On November 9, 1938, after the annexation of the Sudetenland to Germany, he was elevated to the rank of SS Untersturmführer, becoming commander of the 10th company of the SS Regiment "Germany". During the Polish campaign, he took part in the battles as part of the 9th company, and a little later he was transferred to the 12th regiment (standard) of the "Dead Head", where he took command of the 6th company. Having received the rank of SS Obersturmführer, he commanded the 3rd company and, as its commander, on August 20, 1940 was awarded the Iron Cross, second class. After his SS standard was disbanded at the end of the summer of 1940, he led the 10th company in the 15th Totenkopf standard. From December 1940, he commanded the 1st company of the 5th Infantry Regiment of the division

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"Dead Head". His company visited almost all eastern territories from Rastenburg (Kenshtin) to Wischau. In July 1941, he ended up in Brun, where he took command of the 18th company of the 4th battalion of the Leibstandarte. After the start of the aggression against the Soviet Union, Kling was wounded twice in the leg. As a result, on July 16, 1941, he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class, and on November 9 of the same year he was promoted to the rank of SS Hauptsturmführer. After the second wound, he spent several months in the hospital. As a result, in June 1942 he was sent to the SS reserve battalion, where he subsequently trained commanders of tank companies. In November 1942, Kling received an order to go to the 2nd Battalion of the Leibstandarte Panzer Regiment. He arrived at Fallingb. on 24 December 1942. From that moment on, he commanded a heavy tank company of the Leibstandarte division. In terms of its composition, the company of "tigers" was in many respects a unique unit. It numbered 306 people, who were given 119 vehicles, including tanks. Despite the fact that Kling commanded a company, his official duties were very close to those of a battalion commander. His immediate assistant was SS-Obersturmführer Waldemar Schutz, who formally was only a platoon commander, but in helping Kling actually reached the level of a company commander in his powers. In the command of tank units, this was a unique case. When the company of "tigers" began its operations on the Eastern Front, Schutz remained the commander of the 1st platoon. Waldemar Schutz was born on October 9, 1913 in Dausenau. From his youth, he moved up the party and military ladder. So, for example, in 1937 he became a junker of one of the ordersburgs ("order castles"). After the Polish campaign, the Leibstandarte moved to Prague. The headquarters of the elite unit and some of the officers of the Leibstandarte were stationed in Bad Ems. On December 7, 1939, the burgomaster of this town invited

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employees of the headquarters of the Leibstandarte, headed by Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich. The meeting was also attended by Waldemar Schutz, who was a friend of the burgomaster. During a table conversation, Schutz asked if he could join the Leibstandarte. Sepp Dietrich asked one of his officers: "Keilhaus, can we take him to us?", in response

Pro-SS Obersturmführer Waldemar Schütz sounded: "We cannot, but you personally can." As a result, the issue was resolved in a few minutes. So Schutz ended up in the 13th company. On December 8, 1939, he took off the party uniform of a Junker of the Ordersburg and put on the gray uniform of the Waffen-SS. In March 1940, Sepp Dietrich sent Schütz to the SS Junker School in Bad Tölz to become an SS officer candidate after graduation. As a result, on November 9, 1940, Schutz became an Untersturmführer. During the Balkan campaign and the attack on the USSR, he served in his old company (at that time the 1st company of the heavy battalion). In 1941, he was awarded the infantry badge "For the attack", and a little later the Iron Cross, second class. At the beginning of 1942, Schutz transferred to the 1st tank company and moved to Willflecken. In Evre he ended up in the 7th Panzer Company, and in November 1942, already in the rank of SS Obersturmführer, he was in Fallingbommel equipping the 7th Company with heavy tanks. The commander of the 2nd platoon of a heavy tank company was SS-Untersturmführer Hannes Philipsen. "Gannes" was born on December 16, 1921 in Dollerup near Flensburg, which lay on the border with Denmark. In Sep

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In October 1939, a seventeen-year-old student of the Faculty of Agriculture and Jungstammführer of the local Hitler Youth cell intends to volunteer for the front. He falls into the ranks of the 2nd motorcycle company of the Germania regiment, which was located in Ellvan gene. After undergoing military training on May 5, 1940, Philipsen aka- SS Untersturmführer Hannes Philipsen

battery of assault guns formed in the Leibstandarte. There he undergoes retraining as an artilleryman. In the period from October 1940 to March 1941, he leaves the ranks of the Leibstandarte, as he was sent as a leader to Lorraine, where he will command the 715th Hitler Youth Bann for several months. But on March 4, 1941, he convinces the leadership of the Nazi youth organization to return him to the ranks of the Leibstandarte. For some time he serves as a motorcyclist, who provides communication between the headquarters of the unit and the battery of assault guns. It is Philipsen who will be the first member of this battery to be first awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class, and then the general badge "For Attack". After participating in the battles on the Eastern Front in November 1941, Philipsen was sent to the SS Junker School in Bad Tölz. After the successful completion of the officer training course, which ended | March 1942, Philipsen, with the rank of Oberscharführer, transferred to the Leibstandarte tank battalion, where he joined the ranks of the 4th platoon. On November 9, 1942, he received a promotion. Already in order

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Untersturmführer on December 15, 1942, he leads a tank platoon. The 3rd tank platoon was commanded by SS-Untersturmführer Wendorf. Helmut Max Ernst Wendorff was born on October 20, 1920 in Grauwinkel near Schweidnitz. In 1931 he moved with his family to Damme (Uckermark), where his father took up farming. IRI Teria Wendorf Jr. was able to make a career in the Hitler Cross (February 12, 1944) Yugende. In the autumn of 1939 he even graduated from the National Political Educational Institution (Napolas) in Naumburg. When World War II broke out, he volunteered for the Leibstandarte. On November 6, Wendorff ended up in Prague, where the Leibstandarte temporarily stayed after the Polish campaign. At first he was enrolled in the 11th company, but in February 1940 he was transferred to the battery of assault guns. Wendorf's battle solution was the Balkan campaign, which almost smoothly turned into an attack on the Soviet Union. On September 14, 1941, SS navigator Wendorf was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class and the badge "For tank combat". On November 1, 1941, already in the rank of SS Oberscharführer, he, like many other colleagues, was sent to study at the SS cadet school in Bad Tölz. In April 1942, Wendorf returned with the rank of SS-Unter Sturmführer to the battery of assault guns. But he didn't stay there for long. He spent Christmas 1942 already in the "Tiger" company in Fallingbommel. Helmut Wendorf, nicknamed by his colleagues

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Bubi, was popular among SS officers. He stood out among them for his military abilities.

A light tank platoon, which consisted of five Pz11 medium tanks, was commanded by the man to whom this book is dedicated, SS Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann.

Michael Wittmann was born on 22 April 1914 in the tiny village of Vogeltal in the Upper Palatinate. He was the first child of Johann Wittmann and his wife Ursula. Almost all of Michael's ancestors were Bavarian peasants. So were his grandparents. His father Johann was born in the same Vogeltal on 5 October 1889. His wife Ursula, who was three years older than her husband, was born in the village of Marshal near the town of Holzkirchen. Their wedding took place on April 6, 1913. Michael's grandparents owned a large house in Vogeltal, which had number 3. Vogeltal itself was a small (by Bavarian standards) village with hardly more than 120 inhabitants. It was a typical German village, of which at that moment there were thousands in the Kaiser's empire. Michael had a younger brother and sister: Johann, who was born on July 1, 1916, and Franziska Marie, born on February 22, 1918. Michael spent most of his childhood in rural chores in a Bavarian village. When he was six years old, he went to the local elementary school. He completed his schooling in April 1930.

SS-Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann - commander of a light tank platoon

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At the beginning of 1920, Michael's father sold his house in Vogeltal and moved with his family to Nildreweier, a village in the Münchmünster region. There, on April 20, 1921, the second daughter, Annie, was born in the Wittmann family. Meanwhile, the head of the family continued to buy and sell rural land, which meant more moves.

As a result, the Michael family of 1934. Michael Wittmann, voluntarily undergoing the Imperial, ended up in Zaustel, where the third daughter, Teresa, was born on October 3, 1923. Now there were five growing children in the Wittmann family. The sixth child died at the age of eight. Meanwhile, Johann Wittmann moved to the village of Rammersberg, which was located in the district of Neumarkt (Upper Palatinate). Later he moved again - this time Heochenberg (village with 80 inhabitants). There he became the owner of an inn.

As already mentioned, Michael completed his ten-year schooling in April 1930. He recalled this time: "After I left school, I helped my parents with the housework." A 16-year-old boy could not continue his studies, as the poor economic situation in the country forced him to work. On December 10, 1932, Michael's father moved to Ingolstadt without his family, where in April 1933 his younger brother Johann became an apprentice to a baker.

Michael grew up as a handsome young man. His height was 176 centimeters. He had an open, somewhat rounded face with clear grey-blue eyes. He grew up quiet and gave the impression of a very smart young man. From 1 July to 1 October 1933 Michael

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worked in an oil mill. After that, he voluntarily went to serve in the Imperial labor service, which had just begun to take shape. As part of this social project of the Third Reich, he worked from February 1 to August 1, 1934. After completing his labor service, Michael Wittmann lived for some time in Weidenhüll, a small village of 50 inhabitants near the town of Velburg. By that time, his mother, along with some of her sisters, had moved to Marshall.

An important event for the whole of Germany was the economic recovery, which became possible thanks to the economic policy of the National Socialists. As a result, Michael Wittmann, who turned 20, decided to join the Reichswehr. For two years he goes to the military

service. On October 30, 1934, he ended up in a military unit in Freising, a city located just north of Munich. He ended up in the 10th company of the 19th infantry regiment. Over the next 23 months, the young Bavaria mastered all types of small arms. Its instructors and commanders were mostly World War I veterans. At that time, universal conscription had not yet been introduced in Germany, and the Reichswehr was formed exclusively from volunteers. Many later noted that Wittmann was a good infantryman. It stood out favorably during forced marches and exercises. He was awarded the 1st class badge for accurate shooting. After a year of service, he received his first promotion. On November 1, 1935, he became a corporal. It was in this year that Hitler ordered the introduction of universal military

duty.

Wittmann's period of service in an infantry regiment ended on September 30, 1936. Even during the service, his father repeatedly recommended that he come to Ingolstadt. On October 1, 1936, he followed his father's advice. In civilian life, Wittmann found that life in the country had improved significantly - poverty and economic disasters were a thing of the past, it was easy to find a job.

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For several weeks he lived in the house of the military pensioner Josef Graf (house 7 on Spreitstraße), which was located on the outskirts of the city. If we talk about the father of Michael Wittmann, in 1932 he stopped doing peasant labor. By the time his son was demobilized, he was working at a textile factory. It was not difficult for Michael himself to find a job. 1935 Michael Wittmann serves in the 19th Infantry Regiment

October 17, 1936 he

became a railroad

we are in Reichertshofen, a town adjacent to Ingolstadt. Wittmann, who was 23 at the time, was much impressed by the achievements of the National Socialists. Never interested in politics, on November 1, 1936, Wittmann applied to join the SS assault (battalion) 1/92, which was based in Ingolstadt. So the young man got into the new elite of the Third Reich. After passing the mandatory procedures (providing a pedigree, etc.), he was admitted to the SS. He received the number 311 623. At first, his service in the SS was limited to the fact that he took part in a number of events in his spare time: sports competitions, demonstrations and parades. In 1936-1937, Wittmann changed his place of residence twice. At first he lived in the house of Manna Mayer, the widow of a World War I veteran, and on March 18 he moved into the house of watchmaker Josef Artmeier. In those days, Wittmann was already working as a security guard for ammunition depots that belonged to the Wehrmacht. However, he did not like this boring and routine work. He wanted to be a soldier. His

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Wittmann (third from left) - Corporal of the 19th Infantry Regiment

drawn to new types of weapons. In the end, he dared to apply to join the Leibstandarte, which was already the most famous and most popular military unit in the entire Third Reich. Despite strict selection criteria, it was accepted. On April 3, 1937, Michael Wittmann moved from Ingolstadt to Berlin. His service in the Leibstandarte began on April 5, 1937, with training at the former cadet school at 63 Finkenstein Alley (Berlin-Lichterfeld). It is noteworthy that Wittmann was a volunteer almost all his life: he voluntarily joined the Imperial labor service, voluntarily joined the Reichswehr, and then the SS. Due to the fact that Wittmann had already completed military service, he was accepted into the SS not with the rank of applicant, but already with the rank of SS. Almost immediately, he got into the 17th company of the Leibstandarte, which had previously been a tank reconnaissance platoon. This platoon was formed in October 1936 by SS-Obersturmführer Georg Schönberger from twenty soldiers and non-commissioned officers.

The process of increasing the platoon began in March 1937. He needed recruits. Its reorganization was completed on April 5, 1937, that is,

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on the very day that Michael Wittmann joined the Leibstandarte. The company commander was Obersturmführer Schoenberger, and the platoon commanders were Unter-Sturmführer Max Wunsche, Ernst Bals and Hans Pfeiffer. It was Max Wunsche who was responsible for training the recruits. As a result, Wittmann became one of the first employees of the SS armored units. He and his colleagues did not wear the standard SS, but the black uniform of tankers. In addition, they were distinguished by a large black beret. Service in the company consisted of the study of new types of weapons, which was replaced by guard duty in Berlin.

In September 1937, the 17th company of the Leibstandarte was transferred to Munich on the occasion of Mussolini's visit to Germany. Then she had to stand in the cordon when the Duce visited Berlin. On November 7-10, 1937, Wittmann and his comrades again found themselves in Munich. They were given a special oath. The ceremony took place on the night of November 9 at the Feldherrnhalle memorial complex, which was illuminated by many torches. On the same day, Michael Wittmann was promoted to the rank of SS navigator. In March 1938, the Wittmann company, like the entire Leibstandarte, took part in the march on Austria, which ended with the reunification of this country with the Third Reich. In April, the company returned to Germany. In October of the same year, Wittmann took part in the entry into the Sudetenland. He was deeply impressed by the jubilation of the inhabitants of Austria and the Sudetenland. Later on, his service was largely routine, except for an accident in 1938, when he was wounded in the head. March 13 and | October 1938, he received his first awards - these were medals for the Anschluss and the Sudetenland.

In March 1939, Germany invaded the disintegrated Czechoslovakia, annexing Bohemia and Moravia. By that time, Wittmann had received the rank of SS-Unterscharführer. After that, Wittmann's platoon (a company a year earlier would

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reorganized) went to the town of Gross-Born, where the exercises of the 13th, 14th and 15th companies of the Leibstandarte took place. By the beginning of World War II, he was the commander of an armored car crew.

The motorized regiment "Leibstandarte" from the first days of the war took part in the hostilities in Poland. On the first day, the platoon in which Wittmann served advanced from Namslau to Gol, and then gave its first battle near Bolislavice. But Wittmann himself did not have to fight for very long on the territory of Poland. His armored car was damaged and he himself was forced to return to Berlin. There he took part in the formation of the 5th company of the Leibstandarte reserve battalion. This unit later became the 5th reconnaissance company. Wittmann himself was used as an instructor for new recruits. A funny story happened to Wittmann there. Unlike many SS and Wehrmacht officials, he "clicked" his heels without moving them together, but by moving with one foot, which resulted in a sharper sound. But one day, on an icy parade ground, this technique failed, the recruits began to giggle at the silent instructor. And here Wittmann demonstrated that he could not always be soft and condescending. He was seriously angry, showing the "newcomers" that he who laughs last laughs best. He forced us to disassemble and assemble the Opel R4 armored car under study, which was armed with an MG-34 machine gun, almost in parts. But even in this case, he was far from drill and tiredness.

At the beginning of 1940, Wittmann and several of his comrades-in-arms were transferred to Jüterbog, where the Leibstandarte strike battery, which would later be designated as an assault gun battalion, was just beginning to form. On April 25, 1940, command of the battery was entrusted to SS-Hauptsturmführer Schoenberger, former commander of Michael Wittmann.

Summer 1941. Michael Wittmann and Hannes Fischer

In those days, the battery of assault guns formally belonged not to the armored forces, but to the artillery, and, therefore, was supervised by the Wehrmacht. The only thing that united the crews of the assault guns with the tankers was the cut of their uniform, which differed only in color - the tankers had it black, the "stormtroopers" had it gray. After graduation, the six assault guns of the Leibstandarte were converted into three platoons. Appropriate calculations were selected (soon this word was replaced by a more tanky one - "crews"). Wittmann took command of the 2nd assault gun in Rettlinger's 1st platoon. At that time commanders were still allowed to recruit their own crews. So under the command of Wittmann was navigator Karl Brüggenkamp (gunner-gunner). It is noteworthy that Wittmann literally snatched it from another commander of the assault gun. driver-mechani

whom he had SS Unterscharführer Philipp Fritz, and SS navigator Hermann Kneusgen was the loader. On July 16, 1940, the Leibstandarte assault gun battery took part in the march to Paris. Then there was a temporary lull. At this time, the Leibstandarte began to expand significantly. As a result, the battery of assault guns became the 4th company of the 5th heavy battalion "Life Standard".

In February 1941, the Leibstandarte was transferred to Romania and then to Bulgaria. On April 6, 1941, the Third Reich began the conquest of the Balkans. German troops invaded Greece and Yugoslavia. In Greece, in addition to the local army, they were also opposed by the British, among whom were Australian and New Zealand units. Wittmann's assault gun had to cross the narrow paths through the mountains. On April 30, the capture of Greece was completed. After that, the Leibstandarte was transferred to Yugoslavia. There the most elite part of the Reich received reinforcements, including an infantry battalion. The battery of assault guns and self-propelled anti-tank guns were merged into the Leibstandarte heavy battalion, better known as the Schönberger battalion.

After the unleashing of Germany's aggression against the USSR, in July 1941, the Leibstandarte was transferred to the Eastern Front. In the very first battle, Wittmann's assault gun was attacked by eighteen Soviet tanks. Even then, the makings of a brilliant tankman appeared in him. Despite a significant Soviet superiority, Wittmann was able to knock out six tanks and put the rest to flight. It was his first phenomenal success. For this fight, Wittmann was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class. During the fighting in 1941, Wittmann showed himself to be an adherent of individualistic tactics. He preferred to be a lone fighter. His gunner Otto Schelte recalled: "Michel (that's what he was called then

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Attack on the USSR. Michael Wittmann - first from the left

service mates. - Auth.) was a quiet and very gifted non-commissioned officer, who was clearly aware of the goals that stood before him.

In the first weeks of August 1941, German troops reach the Black Sea coast. August 10-17 "Leibstandarte" is fighting in the area of the New Bug. On August 19, the SS enter Kherson. During the fighting in Kherson, the assault guns under the command of Wittmann do something unusual - they sink a Soviet submarine and gunboat. By this time, Wittmann had already knocked out ten Soviet tanks. During these battles, Wittmann was wounded by shell fragments in the face. As a result, he is awarded not only the badge "For Wound", but also presented to the Iron Cross, first class. In September 1941, Wittmann was back in the ranks.

At this time, the Leibstandarte was advancing from the Black Sea along the Dnieper. In October, this SS unit fought near Melitopol and Berdyansk. October 8 Melitopol

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November 1941. Attack on Rostov. Third right (standing) SS-Unterscharführer Michael Wittmann

was taken by the Germans. A day earlier, Wittmann had pushed too far through the streets of the city and lost his bearings. He barely managed to fight his way back to the German lines. During this battle, he was wounded in the thigh.

Hauptsturmführer Ernst Walter gave an interesting description of Wittmann: "He was a rather quiet type, but by no means reserved. In every way he was a model for his subordinates, and not only for them. His behavior in military conditions was rather characteristic of an ordinary person in ordinary conditions. I have rarely met a man in whom all sorts of virtues were so well combined.

Meanwhile, the German advance in Eastern Ukraine continued. On October 17, 1941, Taganrog was taken by the Germans. By this point, Wittmann had been wounded three times in total. On November 9, 1941, he was promoted to the rank of SS Oberscharführer. At that time, in the course of constant attacks and fierce Soviet resistance, the Leibstandarte was bled to death. Its combat strength has fallen to a critically dangerous point. After the capture of Rostov-on-Don, Wittmann

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receives a silver badge "For wounds". By the end of 1941, the battery of assault guns began to be located in Taganrog. It was from here that they made sorties to the east and north. Wittmann did not actually take part in these episodic battles - he again acted as an instructor.

In February 1942, the assault gun battery of the Leibstandarte was enlarged to the size of a battalion. This happened due to the transfer of part of the self-propelled guns from the SS division "Viking". The command of the new battalion was entrusted to SS-Hauptsturmführer Max Wünsche. Schoenberger himself at that moment was in Germany, where he was supposed to be engaged in the formation of the Leibstanlant tank battalion.

Michael Wittmann himself became an SS officer candidate at the beginning of 1942. In June 1942, he left the battalion to take special courses at the SS Junker School in Bad Tölz. He started training

Early 1942, Taganrog. Michael Wittmann second from left

June 4th. In 1942, Bad Tölz was one of the most modern officer schools. Wittmann learned tactical planning skills there. He combined the acquired knowledge with his combat experience. At the SS Junker School, he became one of the most talented students. After graduation, which took place on September 5, 1942, he was sent to Weimar, where he was appointed commander of a tank platoon. Wittmann had to change his uniform again. From the gray assault artillery uniform, he changed into a black tank uniform, which he already wore from 1937 to 1940. On December 21, 1942, Wittmann was awarded the title of SS-Untersturmführer. After that, he received an order to go to Fallingb., where a heavy tank company of the Leibstandarte was being formed. He had to meet the "tigers".

Wittmann, by virtue of his character, was respected and appreciated by his new colleagues, but in those days nothing indicated that he would become the most famous tank commander of the Third Reich. Initially, the functions of Michael Wittmann as commander of a light tank platoon were reduced to

only to protect the heavy "tigers" from attacks at close range. In fact, in all offensive operations, he was assigned a secondary role. His platoon was a kind of "protective screen" for the new tank technology. The R7Sh tanks were equipped with a long-barreled 50 mm gun and had additional turret armor. One of the R7USh tanks was commanded by nineteen-year-old Franz Staudegger, who at that moment was an SS Rottenführer. The non-commissioned officer ranks of the Leibstandarte heavy tank company came from different units. During the attack on the USSR, SS Unter Scharführer Jürgen Brandt served in the artillery. By the autumn of 1941, he had become an artilleryman on one of the assault guns. In the autumn of 1942, it was decided to send him to the tank regiment "Leib

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SS Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann

standard." But for starters, he was trained in the 4th training tank battalion, which was based in Medling (vicinity of Vienna). Only after that he was in the "tiger" company.

SS Rottenführer Karl Wagner was originally an infantryman. In June 1940, he began his service in the 2nd company of the Führer reserve battalion. Somewhat later, he was transferred to the 10th SS reserve artillery battery, located in Munich. There he learned how to handle a field gun mounted on a tractor base of the TEN 18 type. In the summer of 1942, Wagner was sent to the rocket battery of the artillery regiment of the Leibstandarte division. But from there he almost immediately ended up in the 3rd company of the tank regiment. On October 28, 1942, he began training as a tank loader.

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shchy. On December 8, 1942, he was part of an SS company of heavy tanks. At that moment, his personal number in the company was 206, which in itself is an indicator of the quantitative composition of this unit.

Unlike other Leibstandarte tank companies, the heavy tank company had its own maintenance platoon.

Hauptscharführer Julius Porupski, living, who was a commander, VZV I

about staffed by a mechanic-maintenance (by 1944

Obersturmführer SS) mi of the highest class, spo

own to repair the complex mechanisms of the "tiger". This platoon, which included the evacuation department and the artillery and technical supply department, was commanded by SS Hauptscharführer Julius Porupski. The thirty-year-old native of Carinthia, who was one of the veterans of the Leibstandarte, was known by the nickname "Bimbo". At the head of the maintenance department was SS-Unterscharführer Erich Koreinke. SS-Haupt-Sturmführer Kurt Habermann enjoyed no less respect in the company of heavy tanks. He was considered indispensable  
a dumb person, as he was in charge of fuel supplies.

Almost immediately after receiving a new military postal code, the company of heavy tanks acquired its official name. It was called the 4th (heavy) company of the SS Panzer Regiment "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler". As the 4th company, this unit was supposed to obey the commander of the 1st tank regiment, but taking into account

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Because of its special nature, it reported directly to the commander of a tank division.

It makes sense to say a few words about the rank and file of a heavy tank company. How did they get into its composition? Alfred Lünzer, an SS Panzerschütz, described his appointment to this tank unit as follows: "I was born on July 2, 1925. Of the 42 sixteen-year-old volunteers, only 7 were able to get into the Leibstandarte. And I was one of them. As soon as I turned 17, on June 19, 1942, in Berlin, I signed up for the Leibstandarte. They had to undergo training that lasted from three to four months. During this time, the training company decreased from 270 to 180 people. This short period played a huge role in the rest of my life. Those who failed to complete the training disappeared from our horizons. In October 1942, all this "society" and I, including myself, went to Evreux in France. The former Franiusian barracks housed approximately three companies of infantry. They decided to make a tank unit out of us. They announced: "Everyone who has a driver's license, step forward. You will be drivers-mechanics. All graduates of gymnasiums and technical schools, step forward. You will be gunners-radio operators. Everyone who has previously studied heavy machine guns, step forward. You will be charging." I ended up in the last group. Until that moment, I was familiar only with a machine gun. Despite the fact that we were to become tankers, we still wore gray infantry uniforms. To train three companies, only three tanks were available. In the beginning, we had only a few teachers who had knowledge only in the tactical and technical data of the tank. Most of the information received from them was pure theory. It was not uncommon for platoon leaders to explain the tank to us using pictures, after which it would be stated: "We have never seen this with our own eyes." In November 1942, several dozen of us were sent to Fallingbostel (Lower Saxo

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nia, Lüneburg Heath). There we began to undergo retraining, after which the infantrymen began to call us "panzerschutze". Orderlies from Stettin, radio operators from Nuremberg, tank drivers from Weimar, gunners from Munich, and many others who came directly from the field units of the SS "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler" also arrived there. The company commander was Kling, followed by Schutz, Philipsen, Wendorf, Wittmann. The crews had not yet been formed, and a terrible confusion reigned around. On Christmas Day, December 25, 1942, fifteen Panzerschützes, one Sturmman and one Rottenführer, as well as a platoon commander received a special assignment. We were given it early in the morning, immediately after breakfast. "You are given an hour to pack and get rations for a few days, after which you head to the ammunition depots." On the same day, we boarded a train and headed through Hannover to the army ammunition depots in Magdeburg-Königsborn. Re Sh tanks were waiting for us, but for a long time they refused to make them available to us, since there was not enough brake fluid for 50-mm tank guns. We, about a hundred men, were placed in the hall of an old hotel, in the middle of which stood an old pot-bellied stove. In the morning we doused ourselves with a hose in the courtyard. We were given cards. Every morning we listened to lectures in one of the rooms about the peculiarities of using transport in winter conditions. During the day we were free and walked around Magdeburg. It was there that I met my future wife, with whom we corresponded until January 1948. I wrote letters to her for six years, first as a soldier and then as a prisoner of war. Now it is difficult to understand, but then the presence of someone in the Motherland meant a lot to us. I remember letters from near Kharkov, and some of them reached twenty-four pages. My misadventures ended at the end of 1947 when I was set free by the British. I wrote to Magdeburg that, as a member of the SS, I would never go to the Soviet zone. In England I'm like

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the SS was kept in a special camp in Cambridge, where we were regaled with democratic ideas. But by this point she had met another man. Therefore, I had no need to go to Magdeburg again.

Each of us had to pick up a RASH tank in Magdeburg-Königsborn. The tanks were delivered to the railway platforms. There we were read aloud a list of supplies. Regardless of what we indicated, without any verification, we were accepted

lists where we ticked off what was missing. I ended up with a double set of tools for my tank.

With RA tanks we arrived at Fallingbommel. By that time, tank crews had already been formed. This happened in early January 1943. By this moment, the tanks of the RG - "tigers" had already begun to arrive. Every day until midnight we were engaged in preparations and other

Leading Heinz Buchner on the R7Sh tank from the light tank platoon commanded by Wittmann

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responsibilities. In Fallingbommel we practiced on the R0SH and RI tanks, and in Evreux we had to practice on the RAD. In the shortest possible time, we had to learn everything. The crews were finally completed in January 1943. I was an artilleryman in the crew of Staudegger, Foke was the driver-mechanic, Graf was the loader, I don't remember the name of our radio operator. Together we remained until mid-March, until we returned from near Kharkov.

SS navigator Rolf Schamp arrived in Fallingbommel from the 2nd company of the SS tank training battalion. There, his platoon leader for some time was Michael Wittmann, who was then still an SS Oberscharführer. In his diary, Champ wrote in a kind of telegraphic style: "28. [2.1942 - arrival in Fallingbommel. 29. [2.1942 - Wittmann, light platoon. 30. 12.1942 - formation of a company, artillerymen with a platoon commander. 12/31/1942 - singing in the classroom, gala dinner. 01/01/1943 - construction. 01/02/1943 - cleaning up the territory. In those cold winter days, singing was the exception rather than the rule. More time was devoted to training. The crew members had to be well acquainted with the device of the "tiger", as well as be able to act in a coordinated manner.

In the first days of frosty January 1943, the new company of Leibstandarte heavy tanks was inspected by the Gauleiter of Hanover Hartmann Lautebacher. He was met and led by Michael Wittmann. Lautebacher's interest was not idle. He himself at one time wanted to become a member of the Leibstandarte, but an accident during training put an end to his career in the Waffen-SS. So he took the opportunity to personally greet the new company of the elite SS division. By January 1943, the heavy tank company was fully equipped with personnel and tanks. It consisted of a total of fifteen "Tigers" and five R2Sh. At that time, the company did not

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a few crew commanders and driver mechanics were enough, who were sent to Kassel to the Henschel enterprise to undergo technical training there for three weeks. The training proceeded at a very fast pace. There they tried to simulate the battle, they were trained in the use of guns and machine guns. As soon as the training was over, the tactics of the company began to be studied, the main formation of which was an armored wedge, covered from the flanks by Wittmann's light platoon. This completed the training of tank crews. At the end of January, they began to prepare for departure. "Tigers" and Rx were painted in white camouflage. Now no one had any doubts that the Eastern Front was ahead of them.

## Chapter 2 KHARKOV

The transfer of a company of "Tigers" to the East in conditions when the drivers were not too familiar with these machines was not an easy task. It should not be forgotten that great hopes were pinned on the "tigers", and therefore their arrival on the Eastern Front had to be kept secret. Therefore, during transportation by rail, every single car was covered with a tarpaulin.



SS-Sturmman Rolf Schamp, now a gunner in the crew of Unterscharführer Wischen, wrote in his diary during this trip: "1.02. 1943 - 11 p.m., departure from Fallingbostel begins. February 2, 1943 - Berlin. 02/03/1943 - we cross the border of the Reich. February 4, 1943 - Vilna, Kovno. February 5, 1943 - Minsk, Gomel. 02/07/1943 - unloading in Kharkov, drinking coffee, which freezes in the cold. By February 9, one after another, all four platoons of the Leibstandarte heavy tank company arrived in Kharkov.

Rottenführer Werner Wendt described this rail transfer as follows: "In early February 1943, we arrive in Russia. Our driver received an important manual for the operation of the tank, but carelessly forgot to read it. Our commander was SS-Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann. He called the driver to him and gave him a stern warning, but he did not bring this case to the attention of the company commander. Such a penalty on the part of Wittmann meant more than any other punishment. He was able to understand the feelings and thoughts of his subordinates, which made him an excellent officer."

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During the transportation of the Tigers, a fire broke out on one of the railway platforms. It was quickly extinguished, and the company did not suffer any losses. In addition, batteries were removed from the tanks during transportation, which was supposed to prevent the release of poisonous gases in case of unforeseen situations. Panzerschütze Alfred Lünzer, who found himself in Wittmann's platoon, recalled: "In Fallingbostel, among us, going to Russia on the second echelon, there was an active discussion about who could sit in the tank during the trip and be on duty there. It was February, not very cold, besides, the "tigers" were covered with a tarp. As we passed through Hanover and Magdeburg, the workers peering out of the factory windows waved to us gleefully. But the farther we moved to the East, the less was the jubilation. It was getting colder. When we crossed the border of the Reich, there was no one left who would voluntarily want to sit inside the tanks. It was decided to put observers on the tanks, who were supposed to make sure that the tanks did not move off the platform. In addition, there were Soviet partisans. However, no incidents happened to us during the trip to Kharkov. Meanwhile, it was getting colder and colder.

Arriving in Kharkov, we were forced to temporarily refuse to unload the RgPT. The engines would not start in the cold. Using hot straw, we tried to warm them up, but all was unsuccessful. Then we just rolled them down off the platform. Somewhere in the distance, the cannonade of Soviet artillery was already heard. When the technical support unit arrived, we entrusted them with our tanks. We ourselves went after the company. At the station, we found mountains of weapons that belonged to our allies: Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks. We knew that in the very near future the Soviets were to launch an offensive. At the Kharkov station, we were given an extra ration, which immediately disappeared like smoke from a candle."

Most of the trains were unloaded in Kharkov, but the last transport under the command of Wittmann

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was to go to Poltava. A total of six "Tigers" and three R7Sh were to take up positions at the station there and await orders.

At the beginning of February 1943, the troops of the Waffen-SS tank corps, commanded by Paul Hausser, concentrated near Kharkov. The SS Leibstandarte and Reich divisions were the first to take up positions. The SS division "Totenkopf" arrived with some delay. From the north, their positions were covered by the Panzergrenadier Division "Grossdeutschland". With all the forces at their disposal, the Germans planned to stop the Soviet advance on Kharkov. Separate units of the SS division "Leibstandarte" were located on fortified lines to the east and southeast of the city. For the most part, the Germans themselves did not build fortifications, for this they rounded up the local population. Until a certain point, the Germans managed to counter-

forge and reflect small Soviet sorties. But by February 8, it became clear that the Red Army was preparing for a general offensive, during which it was planned to encircle Kharkov. At the same time, the Soviet units were advancing into the Donetsk coal basin from the north, which could allow them to cut off the German units that had established themselves along the banks of the Mius River from supply routes. If this Soviet strategic plan had come to fruition, then most of Army Group South would have been blocked or at least cut off from its own network of communications. As a result, a crisis situation would arise for the Germans on the entire Eastern Front. And in this case, Paul Hausser's Waffen-SS Panzer Corps was to become the striking force tasked with stopping the Soviet advance.

But even for the SS, things did not go well. In order to avoid unnecessary losses, the Leibstandarte division was ordered to leave its positions. On February 10, 1943, in conditions of severe frost, the retreat began in deep snow. In some sectors of the front, units of the Red Army were pursued from

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advancing Germans, intending to hit them in the rear. But it was on that day that a powerful strike group was formed from the Leibstandarte, which was placed under the command of SS Obersturmbannführer Kum, who served in the SS Reich division. This strike group also included the tank regiment of the Leibstandarte. But most of the "tigers" could not take part in the battles. Two tanks went out of action due to engine damage. Another car ended up in the river, as the bridge collapsed under it, along which it was moving. The Gigram was to fight off a Soviet attack aimed at the Rogan station, located southeast of Kharkov. Fierce fighting ensued there, as the Soviet command planned to break through the German line of defense in the area between the positions of the 2nd (Hansen) and 3rd (Weidenhaupt) battalions of the SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. At the same time, the command of the Waffen-SS tank corps, led by Paul Hausser, despite Hitler's order, decides to leave Kharkov in order to save the tank formation from complete destruction.

For many tank crews of the Leibstandarte tank regiment, this was a baptism of fire. Alfred Lünzer, a seventeen-year-old gunner of the Px tank, recalled: "We were assigned to Peiper's tank battalion. Our tank was commanded by the nineteen-year-old Unterscharführer Staudegger, the driver was Rottenfuehrer Focke, who was also nineteen years old. He already had combat experience, since, as a driver-mechanic of an assault gun, he participated in the battles last winter. He even wore the Frozen Meat medal! In their

1 This was the name of the medal "For the Winter Campaign in the East 1941-1942" in the soldier's jargon. It was awarded to military personnel who served on the Eastern Front for at least four months during the period between November 15, 1941 and April 15, 1942 and who participated in the bloody battles of this period. A dark red ribbon with a white-black-and-white stripe symbolized: red - blood shed in battles, white - endless Russian snows, and black - all the fallen.

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for seventeen years I was an artillery gunner, Graf was a loader. With Peiper in the lead, we had to hold a front 80 kilometers wide. In a normal situation, the division would have to operate in a sector 20 kilometers wide. During the offensive, a conflict arose in the crew. Our commander was agitated and even, I would say, nervous. He was very dissatisfied with the way Foke drove the tank. In our opinion, Foke was a very experienced driver. In the end, he simply turned off the engine and said: "Unterscharführer, if you can drive a tank better, then take my place." Staudegger: "Foke, I will hand you over to the tribunal." Foke: "Well ... Then full speed ahead." He started the engine and drove off. There was no tribunal."

Meanwhile, the situation in the Leibstandarte was becoming close to critical. The southern strike group lost contact with the command of Army Group South. In the positions of the Germans there was a "gap" of almost 200 kilometers! It was here that General Popov threw Soviet tanks and infantry units. They outflanked most of the formations of Army Group South, advanced into the northern part of the Donbass and quickly approached the Dnieper. The 6th Soviet Army managed to quickly develop its tactical success. On the left wing, the VI Guards Cavalry Corps was thrown into battle against the Leibstandarte units. The Soviet units, moving far to the south, could attack the Leibstandarte positions from the rear. On February 15, 1943, units of the Red Army entered the northwestern quarters of Kharkov. In the next few hours, they could also enter the western and southeastern outskirts of the city. Under these conditions, the Leibstandarte had to hold a section of the front 80 kilometers wide. Paul Hausser decided to urgently evacuate the German military group from Kharkov. On the same day, Hausser received news from the Leibstandarte that his units had succeeded in destroying the 1st Soviet Guards Cavalry Corps.

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pus. Subdivisions of the SS reconnaissance battalion and the 1st Leibstandarte tank battalion, commanded by SS Sturmbannführer Max Wünsche, took direct part in this battle.

Now parts of the Leibstandarte could take up new defensive positions southwest of Kharkov. But at the same time, the flat terrain in this area greatly interfered with the effective use of German tanks. In some places, the snow depth reached two meters. It was covered with an ice crust, which allowed only light armored personnel carriers and armored vehicles to pass through it. The tanks immediately failed. A wall of snow instantly appeared in front of them, which not only interfered with the driver's view, but actually stopped the car with its mass. As a result, a heavy company equipped with "tigers" could not enter the battle as a separate unit. Part of the tanks turned out to be possible to use only in the vicinity of the Merefa station. On February 7, 1943, SS navigator Pöve used his "Tiger" to pull out a RU tank from the 7th company (tail number 717), whose engine had stalled. In the diaries of SS navigator Shampa, the following entries were preserved: "06.02. 1943 - evening march, tank under fire. February 9, 1943 — Merefa, breakfast with Russian peasants. On February 12, 1943, the crew of the "Tiger", commanded by Unterscharführer Vischen (artilleryman Champ), moved out of Merefa in the direction of Poltava. Found along the way. that the tank's engine caught fire. After unsuccessful attempts to save the car, the crew was forced to abandon it. In those days, the first models of "Tigers" very often suffered from engine fires. A number of researchers consider this phenomenon "inexplicable". However, the answer to this question can be found in Guderian's book Tanks Forward! In particular, he writes the following in it. "The danger of ignition of the tank arose not only from a direct hit by a projectile, but also from the leakage of gasoline or oil due to damage

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gaskets or engine wear. In this case, the fuel got on the engine and could easily ignite." Apparently, in this situation it was just such a case. Having got out of the tank, the crew of Vishen was forced to spend several days in the bitter cold. The fact is that they were forbidden to keep the new model of the tank, the secret "tiger". Without waiting for help, on the night of February 15-16, it was decided to destroy the "tiger" so that it would not fall into the hands of the Red Army. The tank was blown up on February 16, 1943 at 11:15. The next day, the crew, left without a tank, managed to get to the village of Novaya Vodolaga. Five tankers spent several days there. By February 25, after four days of travel through frost, they managed to reach the city of Krasnograd. But the crew in full force did not last long - on March 9, its commander, Vishen, was killed in battle.

Alfred Lünzer, a gunner from the R7Sh crew of Staudegger, described the events of those days in this way. "We and our tanks were used to stop the Soviet offensive. At that moment in

The battalion was mainly armored personnel carriers, floating cars and motorcycles. During the defensive battles, I was "wounded". It happened one sunny morning in a village located between Poltava and Kharkov. Our tank was parked in a village street behind one of the houses, near Peiper's command post. Suddenly, a convoy of Soviet trucks appeared on the horizon. She moved without foreseeing danger. When this was reported to Piper, he exclaimed: "What audacity! They can't get away with it."

At that moment, our driver was absent somewhere, but the tank was on alert. Staudegger immediately took his place. He commanded: "Lünzer, give me instructions." We all knew how to drive a tank, but neither we nor Staudegger were drivers. But we really didn't want Piper to know that our driver wasn't there. We knew that in order to start the tank,

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Fierce resistance of the "Leibstandarte" south of Kharkov

it was necessary to properly pull the brake lever. But Staudegger did everything exactly the opposite, as a result, I was almost stamped by the stern of the tank into an armored personnel carrier standing behind. Everything could have ended very badly, as my pants began to tighten in the tread of the tank. But everything worked out. Piper then said: "Lucky." I still don't know if he addressed me or Staudegger. I was carried into Piper's house, laid on a bed that consisted only of legs and a bare spring mattress. After that they sent for a nurse. Then the frost was 28 degrees below zero, and we immediately put on several clothes. At that moment, I was wearing long socks, long underwear, blue canvas pants, black tank pants, which were complemented by white linen camouflage pants, turned gray from oil and fuel. It was these numerous pants that saved my right leg. The lower leg swelled almost immediately and became a solid bruise, but the bone was intact. There was no open wound, so I could continue to fight. I was hoisted into the tank turret. I had no replacement, but I had to fight. So for two or three weeks I was first loaded and then removed from the tower. I was loaded there in the morning and removed only in the evening. But this had its advantages, while the crew spent the evenings cleaning the gun barrel with a large ramrod, I sat in a Russian

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peasant hut and cleaned only the breech of the gun or machine gun. After that, boxes of ammunition were brought to me, and I stuffed machine-gun belts with them, inserting a tracer charge through four cartridges. In many ways, I was a burden to the crew, but they could not do anything because they could not find a replacement for me. But in the end, she was still found in the person of Habermann.

In those days, the SS Panzer Corps managed the virtually impossible — it stopped the advance of three Soviet armies, as a result of which the situation on the southern sector of the Eastern Front was stabilized. Already on February 19, 1943, the German units that were on the defensive south of Kharkov gradually began to go over to the offensive. By February 21, the daily report of the Life Standard reported that only 6 Tigers and 49 R7Sh tanks remained in service. As a result, on February 24, it was decided to send all units not involved in the battles to Krasnograd, so that the equipment could be repaired there and the personnel could rest for at least a few days. On the same day, the headquarters of the SS division Leibstandarte was transferred to Krasnograd. By that time, there were still a few "tigers" left in Poltava, as well as medium tanks, which Wittmann delivered on the last echelon from Germany.

SS Rottenführer Werner Wendt recalled this period of the war: "In Poltava, Untersturmführer Wittmann often came to our houses to chat with old comrades who had come over to us from assault guns. One day he came in while I was cleaning my gun. Suddenly, because of my oversight, the gun went off. Frightened, I looked at Untersturmführer Wittmann, expecting that a storm was about to begin. Wittmann gave me a long, stern look and left the room without saying a word. It affected me more than anything

penalties. I cursed myself for my carelessness. Wittmann's silence and his gaze could have had the desired effect.

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On February 25, 1943, the remnants of a heavy company of "Tigers" located in Poltava were sent to the main forces to begin operating in other sectors of the front. From the end of February 1943, a thaw began, which worsened the passability of the roads. On March 1, the Leibstandarte received a new task, it was supposed to break through the Soviet defense line on the front between Orel and the village of Berestoveya, which stood on the river bank.

On March 5, 1943, a company of Leibstandarte heavy tanks was transferred from Poltava to an area located 30 kilometers north of Krasnograd. On this way, the "tiger" of SS Untersturmführer Jürgen Brandt (tail number 436) caught fire. The entire crew almost died in the fire, the tank could not be saved, but the tankers survived. This was one of the many cases when flaws in the design of the "tiger" had an effect (we discussed the causes of such ignitions above). On the way, several more "tigers" broke down. Their crews, along with their vehicles, stayed behind to wait for the repair team. As a result, only four heavy German tanks reached their initial positions.

The 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment was to take first the village of Belezkovo, then the village of Fedorovka and the Bridok collective farm. At the same time, the 1st Reinforced SS Panzergrenadier Regiment was to take Sukhaya Balka, the village of Peski and Vostochnye Valki. At that time, a powerful strike group was formed from the Leibstandarte units. It included, in addition to the "Tigers" company, the 1st battalion of the tank regiment, the 3rd battery of the artillery regiment, the 2nd company of the anti-tank battalion and units of the rocket artillery regiment. All these forces were concentrated southeast of Krutaya Balka. From here, the SS strike group was supposed to attack the villages of Landyshevo and Blagodatnoye, and then break through to the settlement of Snezhkov Kut. As soon as the orientation on the ground was carried out, there

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The 1st SS Panzer Battalion was sent under the command of Wünsche.

Preparations for the offensive lasted all night on March 6, 1943. The headquarters of the SS division "Leibstandarte" in the period from | hours before 6 o'clock in the morning received messages about readiness for the start of the offensive. At 7 o'clock information came from the reconnaissance battalion that four tanks from the Leibstandarte heavy tank company had arrived at its location, the rest of the "tigers" were still on the way at that moment. On that day, "Tigers" took part in the battle, commanded by SS Hauptsturmführer Kling (tail number 405), SS Untersturmführer Wendorf (435), SS Hauptscharführer Pöchlak (426), SS Hauptscharführer Hartel (418). At 11 o'clock the "tigers" began to advance along the terrible broken and swampy roads. Mayer's reconnaissance battalion, as well as the 1st battalion of the tank regiment, took part in the attack with them. The first few hours of the attack were carried out quite successfully. However, around 2 pm, tanks a few kilometers south of Snezhny Kut came under fire from Soviet anti-tank guns.

SS Obersturmführer Iseke, adjutant to the commander of the 1st Panzer Battalion Wünsche, described this battle as follows: "Our battle group was on the left flank of the division. For the first time in the entire war, we had to be supported by the Tigers. Immediately before starting the offensive, the command sent me a front-line correspondent, whose name was Fernau. "Take him to your tank. He wants to be on the offensive." But where to place it? After a conversation with the crew, I decided that the most suitable place was down on the side of the gun. Artillery opened fire and we drove forward. Due to deep snow, the crews of two motorcycles rode on the armor of a tank. At the same time, the light armored personnel carriers of the reconnaissance battalion were successfully moving forward, but the Volkswagen amphibious vehicles were skidding and stuck in the snow. SS-Sturmabführer Mayer commanded the offensive

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Wittmann (left), Kling (center) and Bubi Wendorff

SS Obersturmführer Beck (commander of the 2nd tank company) from the tank. SS-Sturmbannführer Wünsche advanced in the middle. To his right was the 3rd company of the Leibstandarte Panzer Regiment (SS Hauptsturmführer Labmrecht). They were followed relentlessly at a distance of 500 meters by the 1st Panzer Company (SS Hauptsturmführer Jorgensen). Two "tigers" followed the car of Sturmbannführer Wunsche.

The rest failed mainly due to damage to attachments and fasteners, some of them even caused injuries to individual crew members.

To the left, behind us, in the zone of the 320th Infantry Division, we hear the noise of battle. On a broad front, we continued our offensive across the snow-covered plain. Rooftops are barely visible on the horizon in front of us. It can only be Snezhkov-Kut. During a short stop, the commander of Sturmbannführer Wunsche gives the order to the 1st company, rounding

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a far-flung village, attack it from the east and move towards us. We continue to advance in our direction. To the left in front of the village is a small rise. It looks like the enemy is there. Several times something flashed from there.

We move on. Our companion Fernau says that although he is terribly crackling in his headphones and a little crowded, he is terribly interested. In the meantime, we approached a distance of 2 kilometers to the occupied height, which is already distinguishable. Every now and then snow is blowing up in front of us and on the sides and something is buzzing past us. We were left with 18 tanks, both "tigers" were behind us, the infantry was still sitting on the armor, hiding behind the tower. Fire! Stop! At a small flat height and in front of it now sparkle with a wide front. A curse! It appears to be an anti-tank gun front. The commander orders both companies: "Increase speed! Maneuverability! Forward. To our left, Beck's crew is leaving their tank. What about Sturmbannführer Mayer? The tank does not burn, some movement is noticeable behind it. The continuous fire of our tanks certainly had its effect on the heights. The front tanks are separated from it by another 800 meters. To the left and right of us, two tanks are engulfed in flames. Our tank attack has reached its critical phase. Nobody moved at that moment. Shortly before this, Jorgens (commander of the 1st tank company) reported: "Orion to Mercury (he pronounces the "r" sound especially loudly) – the beginning of the village is 2 km in front of me. No resistance." Commander's response: "Increase speed" Then the commander gives the order to everyone: "Follow me" I scurry to the sides.

We broke away from the others by 150 meters, then I see that the commander's tank is heading obliquely to the barn - under its cover, the area is better viewed.

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In a matter of fractions of a second, my consciousness captures the buzzing sounds around us. From the height in front of us, already well distinguishable, it often sparkles unpleasantly. Probably, advancing to the shed, we got into an unfired space. Now other tanks are moving in.

To my right, obliquely, I see that the commander overcame the 100 meters separating him from the barn. I can already distinguish the first houses at a distance of 200-300 meters from us. At that moment, there was a flash from the first house, and a roar was heard somewhere nearby. In the glow of the fire, I yell: "Reverse." Shortly after that, a second rumble. On my command "leave the tank", we all find ourselves in the snow next to the tank. We have throat cords dangling around our necks. We are burned by the heat of a loved one

flame. Instinctively we bury our heads in the snowdrifts. Six of us - thank God, and Fernau is with us - we crawl like a bellies away from the tank. At that moment, we could not explain to ourselves why, after the first outbreak, the fire did not spread.

Our tank rolled back about 20 meters on a broken caterpillar. As we found out later, a T-34 lay in wait for us in the first house, which gave us this surprise with the first hit. When the tank reversed, we hit a mine. There is no time to think. Rifle shots and machine-gun bursts indicate that the positions are still occupied by the enemy.

But where are our tanks? From the sounds of shots and explosions, we understand that the battle between tanks and anti-tank guns is in full swing. We can't see the commander's tank. Approximately 80 meters away from us, a "tiger" appeared, which is moving towards the height. We want to draw his attention to the T-34. But of course he can't see us. What happened next caused our hearts to first fall into the abyss and then ascend to heaven. As if spellbound, we look to the left with snow-covered eyes. The pain of burns is forgotten. As soon as the "tiger" rose to the dais, there was a roar. All around us are fiery flashes and fragments. Lifting our heads, we see on the tower

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"tiger" spot the size of a square meter. The barrel of the 56-mm gun comes into motion and, like a finger, points to the target. A jet of fire - we got up to see what happened. Half of the house was demolished, and the burning tank, now without a turret, became very clearly visible. We hug with joy. Further events develop with lightning speed.

On the eastern edge, at least two dozen T-34s emerged from their hiding places. Meanwhile, the second "Tiger" arrived in time (commander Untersturmführer Wendorff). In front of the village of Snezhkov-Kut ours knock out eight enemy tanks. In the village itself, it is possible to destroy four more, while the rest of the T-34s disappear in the direction of Valka, to the northeast. Sturmbannführer Wünsche, meanwhile, directed the squad's actions against the anti-tank artillery positions. At the end of the battle, they counted 56. Together with the commander of a company of light armored transporters of the reconnaissance battalion, he organized a cleansing of the village. After giving me medical attention, with my head bandaged, I was able to start doing it again.

his military duty.

The Gigr with tail number 426 (crew commander SS Hauptsturmführer Pöchlak) was hit several times by Soviet shells in the turret, including in the commander's cabin. As a result of one of the hits, the tank gun jammed, and the crew commander was seriously injured. After the car was nevertheless repaired, SS Untersturmführer Modes became the crew commander. SS Rottenführer Wendt remained the gunner in the crew. For the eighteen-year-old Panzerschütze Karl Heinz Warmbrunn ("Bobby"), this fight was the first in his life. In his diary after that, he wrote: "Baptism of fire. In one day, a T-34 and five 76.2 mm anti-tank guns were shot down."

"Gigr" Unterscharführer Wischen that day was in another place, forty kilometers from Snezhkov-Kut,

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near the village of Karlovka. That day the crew received mail from Germany for the first time. But the tankers were not up to reading the letters. Vishen himself was wounded that day.

Meanwhile, the Soviet command sent fresh units to Kharkov. But the Leibstandarte, as well as the entire Waffen-SS Panzer Corps, had already gone on the offensive. The left flank of the Leibstandarte was covered by the SS division "Totenkopf", and the right flank by the SS division "Reich".

On March 7, 1943, at 13:15, a heavy tank company, together with the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte, commanded by SS Standartenführer Witt, with the support of the SS reconnaissance battalion, reached Valka. Continuing to develop the offensive, the SS units were able to take the village by 16:30. This tactical success made it possible to establish direct contact with Peiper's group, which was located somewhat to the north.

On March 8, 1943, units of the Leibstandarte continued to move north. This time, their tactical task was to capture the village of Ogultsy and the subsequent exit to the town of Lyubotin, which was supposed to block the road leading to Kharkov. A company of "tigers", supported by a reconnaissance battalion, without encountering significant resistance, was able to advance from Valka to Bogar.

The next day, March 9, 1943, the village of Perechnaya was taken. In the evening of the same day, a company of heavy tanks was merged into the strike group, the basis of which was the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte. The purpose of this connection was Lyubotin. Meanwhile, SS navigator Champ found documents in one of the damaged T-34s that indicated that the Soviet side had received information about the appearance of a new tank model, and therefore, there was enough time to prepare for a meeting with the "tiger".

Sepp Dietrich, as commander of the SS division "Leibstandarte", planned the return of Kharkov on March 11

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German armored personnel carrier on the outskirts of Kharkov

1943. During an evening meeting with the commander of Army Group South, a call came from Berlin. It was Hitler. The Führer was interested in the well-being of the Leibstandarte employees and expressed genuine concern about the large losses of the personnel of this SS division. Hitler ended his conversation with Dietrich with the words: "If my Leibstandarte will attack with his former energy, then we must succeed in recapturing Kharkov from the enemy."

A company of heavy tanks and the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte launched an offensive at 4 am on March 11, 1943. The combat groups of the SS division, after fierce fighting, were able to break through to the northeastern outskirts of Kharkov. The advancing German units were provided with effective fire support from rocket-propelled artillery mounts. By the evening of the same day, the fighting was already on the outskirts of Red Square, then

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is in the very center of the city. During these battles, SS Unter Sturmführer Philipsen managed to knock out one T-34 and two anti-tank guns. SS navigator Walter Schüle recalled these military operations in the following way: "After we kneaded slush and swamps with caterpillars for the whole night, by morning, under the command of Wunsche, we were able to reach the outskirts of Kharkov. We ended up at the water tower, a little to the left of which were three RGU tanks. On it was a Russian artillery gunner. In the morning, after the rest of the units pulled up to the city, we were ready to invade the city center from two sides. When we tried to carry out this plan, several of our RTs were hit by a Soviet KV tank that had taken cover around the corner of the house. At this point, one of the "tigers" joined us. He slowly crawled in front of us. It was the first time I saw this heavy

Sturmbannführer Joachim Peiper and Standartenführer Teddy Wisch are planning

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tank in action. According to rumors, he was more technically advanced and was indispensable in combat. In any case, we did not expect him to appear. After informing Wunsche of what had happened, he shouted: "Let the giant make the way." The street was quickly cleared. I will not forget the long trunk of the "tiger", which, on a slightly curved street, was ready to crush any obstacle. Then he disappeared from our field of vision. Several more times we heard the explosions of his shells, demolishing houses. The dimensions of the "tiger" were as striking as the dimensions of the KV. Which of these first tanks fired remains unknown. It is possible that they fired at the same time.

The tank duel ended with a Soviet armor-piercing projectile hitting the Tiger's turret. The commander of the "Tiger" Untersturmführer Philipsen was seriously wounded. And the gunner SS Rottenführer Willems was instantly killed. But at the same time, the rest of the crew: SS navigator Willi Repstorf (driver), Panzerschütz Rudi Lechner (loader) and Lorenz Mener remained in  
alive.

On the same day, on the outskirts of Kharkov, an RU tank from the 5th company of the Leibstandarte tank regiment, commanded by SS Obersturmführer Malkhov, was destroyed. The driver of this tank, Haider, recalled that before that the crew had managed to destroy six Soviet tanks (T-34 and KV-2). Freiberg Heinz of the 7th Panzer Company of the Leibstandarte noted in his diary: "Without the support of the Tigers, our RU tanks would not have been able to survive in these battles."

On that day, Kharkov turned into one continuous battle. The houses were filled with Soviet snipers. Heavy anti-aircraft guns were thrown into the battle. German armored personnel carriers and assault guns were virtually on every street. Edgar Berner, officer of the 11th company of the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte, described the events of the evening of March 11, when he was sent to Kharkov. "700 under the cover of darkness, our detachment reached Red Square. Did not have  
you can see nick

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Tanks and panzergrenadiers of the "Leibstandarte" enter Kharkov

whom fire contact with the enemy. A huge square of the square was flooded with moonlight. A deceiving silence reigned. Perhaps our regiment was already here. We saw several infantrymen and asked them: "You are not from the 2nd regiment." We did not receive any answer. Instead, a well-camouflaged tank fired a shell in our direction, which exploded a hundred meters from us. We immediately went down to the basement. It was decided to send a messenger to contact our battalion commander, Sturmbannführer Weidenhaupt. Our messenger returned with an order: we were to stay on Red Square and watch all night. It was decided to keep in touch with us by means of a field telephone. In the basement we were protected from the night frost. When dawn broke, we could not believe our eyes - the entire area was filled with Soviet infantry. The Russians put down their rifles and ate."

Soviet resistance in Kharkov continued on March 12 and 13, 1943. For every quarter  
walked hard

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March 1943 near Kharkov. Completion of the second assault on the city. From left to right: SS-Standartenführer Fritz Witt, SS-Sturmbannführer Max Wünsche and Obersturmbannführer Kurt Mayer, nicknamed Tank

chenny and very intense fight. The Leibstandarte battle group was advancing in a southeasterly direction. On March 14, 1943, the second battle for Kharkov began to approach its climax. At 4:45 p.m., the command of the Leibstandarte reported to the headquarters of the Waffen-SS Panzer Corps that the city center had been taken. On the same day, a special message was broadcast on all radio stations in Germany: "From the Fuhrer's headquarters! March 14, 1943. The High Command of the Wehrmacht reports. After several days of fierce fighting, part-

Army Group "South" succeeded in repulsing the enemy counterattack and pushing him back behind the Donets. During the offensive, the city of Kharkov was again occupied, and the enemy was pinned from the north and east by units of the Waffen-SS, which were actively supported by the Luftwaffe. The level of losses of the enemy has not yet been established."

For the implementation of this operation, Sepp Dietrich was

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awarded - he became a holder of the Knight's Cross with oak leaves and swords. The final liquidation of Soviet troops in Kharkov ended on March 15, 1943. This defeat had great strategic consequences for the Red Army. Almost three hundred kilometers gap in the Eastern Front, which appeared after the Battle of Stalingrad, was successfully closed by the German units. In the days that followed, several surrounding towns were taken. The command of the "Leibstandarte" already set a new goal for itself - Belgorod, which was located somewhat north of Kharkov.

On March 18, 1943, on a very fine and clear day, the 2nd Reinforced Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte, supported by Peiper's detachment, moved northward. The day before, Peiper's unit had been reinforced by two Tigers. The attack began at 06:40. German attack aircraft attacked a section of the front, limited by the villages of Krestovo and Kaumovka. Twenty minutes later, Peiper reported that he was able to break through the Soviet defense line and was successfully advancing towards the village of Otradny. In one of the two "tigers" that took part in this offensive, Werner Wendt was an artilleryman. The crew commanders of these "tigers" were SS Unterscharführers Modes and Otto August. Later Wendt

recalled:

"There was still snow everywhere. The conditions for movement were far from ideal, but the clear blue sky seemed to give us wings. In the morning, the 3rd reinforced battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment broke through the Soviet positions. We moved forward, regrouping. During this march, our goals were already clear to us. RU tanks moved ahead, and then our "tigers". As soon as we crossed the front line, we immediately spotted two well-camouflaged T-34s. We deployed the towers and opened fire on them. Our shells hit the target. The T-34s made a fatal mistake when they tried to hide

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sya. But they could hardly answer us with fire. The engines of our tanks roared, and the caterpillars kneaded the Ukrainian soil, carrying us forward. Above us, a Henschel 126 reconnaissance aircraft was circling in the sky. It descended and threw off a smoke charge, which meant that a few more Soviet tanks were waiting for us ahead. This message made us alert and increase our vigilance. Since the "tigers" were moving behind us, we had to be extremely careful. So we enter the village, the road from which turns a little to the right. And then we can't believe our eyes - a 76.2 mm anti-tank gun of the enemy appears right in front of us. Apparently, our appearance was not expected at all, since the entire artillery crew was sitting on the mound and chatting with the village girls. There was no need to open fire on them. With all our might, we moved an anti-tank gun just in case. Now they couldn't shoot us in the back with it. We continued our movement, and soon we came across two T-34s, which we destroyed without the slightest problem. To the left of the road, a vast expanse opened up, which was dotted with hundreds of fleeing Red Army soldiers. Panic gripped them. They did not expect such a rapid breakthrough. We saw how the flaps of their overcoats fluttered. But we paid little attention to what was happening to our right and left - we were focused on our main goal. We strove for Belgorod, and therefore tried to increase the pace of movement.

It was 11:30, almost noon, when Belgorod appeared before us. We could not read what was written on roadside signs, because we were not familiar with

Cyrillic writing. We were sure that it was Belgorod, which we were to take from the raid. Moving towards it from the southwest, we carefully crossed over a wooden bridge. He withstood our heavy tanks, and we rushed further north. We were accompanied by two detachments in armored personnel carriers. We have already been

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they were about to enter the city, as it sounded: "Behind the tanks." The grenadiers immediately jumped out of the armored personnel carriers and took up positions in the trenches. Our commander ordered: "Towers at six o'clock." We quickly began to deploy the towers, since the Soviet tanks were at a distance of two hundred meters from us. At that moment we received a radio report that enemy tanks had fired on our supply trucks and the vehicles following us. We had to keep the road at all costs. We turned around and headed back along the broken road. As soon as we approached the wooden bridge, we immediately saw that behind it, about 300 meters away, there were several T-34s that were blocking our access roads. We opened fire and immediately knocked out one of the enemy tanks, which began to emit clouds of smoke. Undaunted by our shot, T-34 returned fire. But our next shot hit the target again, which silenced another tank gun. The road was clear again. It was finally cleared by one of the "tigers" of our company. Now all our trucks and cars could move towards Belgorod in complete safety. The city was taken on the move, our task was completed. Advancing on it, we were the first tank to reach Belgorod. This gave us a new impetus. We were proud of ourselves, and faith in the power of our weapons only grew stronger."

Another "Tiger" that took part in this raid was commanded by SS Hauptsturmführer Kling. The gunner-gunner in his crew was "Bobby" Warmbrunn. This crew destroyed a T-34, an M2 half-track armored personnel carrier, three 76.2 mm anti-tank guns, an armored car, and also crushed a 150 mm gun with caterpillars. At 11:35, Peiper broadcast on the radio: "Belgorod has been captured. Eight wrecked tanks. On March 19, 1943, units of the Red Army that continued to control the department

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Wittmann, Warmbrunn (almost hidden from the camera), Höflinger, Lötsch, Woll and Kléber

nye areas in the north of the city, increased pressure on the German armored units.

At 1315 hours, half-tracked armored personnel carriers, supported by the 7th SS Panzer Company and two Tigers, advanced in this direction. A few hours later, Peiper reported that during a clash with Soviet troops near the village of Streletskoye, his battle group destroyed seven Russian tanks. During the battle, a bridge across the river was destroyed in the village, which stopped the German advance and allowed the Red Army units to retreat eastward at night. On March 20, at 6:15 a.m., Peiper's combat group and several "tigers" set out in the direction of Kursk. In the villages of Skopino and Gonki, fierce resistance from the Soviet troops awaited them. After a bloody battle, Peiper's battle group was forced to withdraw to

position to the village of Oskochnoe, where, according to the order received, it went on the defensive. At that time, the SS battle group was fighting 12 kilometers north of Belgorod. The next day, the Leibstandarte units continued to hold all their targets. On that day, in fact, there were no battles with units of the Red Army.

On March 22, 1943, about 600 people arrived in Kharkov. It was non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel - the first replenishment of the "Leibstandarte" as a division. They were immediately distributed among the departments. These days, almost all parts of the Leibstandarte were sent to rest, having received a well-deserved break in the fighting. In almost all reports, the elite part of the SS was extolled as a model of courage and stamina. A little earlier, March 19, Adolf Hitler

issued a special order on the formations of army groups "South" and "Center". The exceptional tactical talent of the officers of the Leibstandarte, who in March 1943 was able to go from defense to offensive and, after heavy street fighting, recapture Kharkov, was noted in many newspapers and radio reports. The "SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler" achieved a great victory over the superior forces of the enemy and covered his banners with unfading glory.

The Tigers, which broke down on the approach to Kharkov, were finally delivered to the city, where their crews were reunited with their company. During these battles, 12 people died in the company. Meanwhile, the Russian spring came, and all the environs of Kharkov turned for some time into an impassable swamp.

A company of heavy Leibstandarte tanks was quartered on the outskirts of Kharkov, which were able to escape destruction. The time provided was used by the employees to clean themselves up. Tankers shaved, washed, cut their hair. They finally had the opportunity to put on a clean field uniform. Washing dirty clothes was instructed

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Kharkov, April 20, 1943. Left to right: Wendorff, Schutz, Michael Wittmann

local residents. Almost all employees of the company were accommodated in private houses. Many noted already after the war that they had quite good relations with the local population. Even the language barrier was not too big of a problem. They portrayed an almost idyllic picture of buying food from local peasants, who, in turn, often invited them to their house for dinner. In any case, none of the employees of the company in those days complained of hunger. Not infrequently the tankers shared their rations with the peasants, in whose houses they stopped to stay. To brighten up their leisure time, the Germans found somewhere a piano and even a gramophone with German records. At this time, the daily routine was not rigid, but no one from the company was going to be lazy. In the evenings, tankers went out for walks in the city. In those days, SS navigator Champ spent a lot of time with his new friend SS Rottenführer Gustav Switzi, a Galician German who was not only the commander of the R7Sh tank, but also often acted as an interpreter. One day Champ went to visit his

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to his comrade, but found him talking with Hauptsturmführer Kling. Champ joined the conversation. Kling, who was essentially a good-natured native of Hesse, asked Champ to write a note on the combat operations of the tank units of the Leibstandarte. Champ complied with this request almost immediately.

In fact, this was the first evidence of the battles in Kharkov. A company of "tigers" as a separate unit did not participate in the battles for the city - only a few "tigers" took part in street battles.

After these battles, Unterscharführer Franz Staudegger, Rottenführer Artur Sommer and Karl Jauss, Ober Sturmführer Philipsen's crew, SS navigator Willi Roepstorf, Panzerschütze Lorenz Mener, Rudolf Lechner, Heinz Willems, "Bobby" Warmbrunn were awarded the Iron Cross of the second class. On April 1, 1943, everyone who participated in the battles for at least three days was awarded silver badges "For a tank battle." But the most unexpected encouragement awaited Rolf Champ. Despite the fact that he was only an SS navigator, he was made a tank commander, which was very unusual for the Second World War. On March 26, he enthusiastically wrote: "I am the commander of tank 418. Hurrah! When can I start acting?"

On March 31, 1943, as part of a company of heavy tanks, a certain redrawing of the crews took place. Rolf Schamp was placed in command of Tiger 426. Its crew consisted of Panzerschütze Fritz Seidelberg (gunner), Werner Irrgang (loader), Herbert Werner (radio operator) and Pieper (driver). The new crew quickly became friends. They were on duty together, went to the theater and cinema together.

The inspector of tank troops, Colonel-General Guderian, and General Kempf visited Kharkov in those days to meet with tankers from the Leibstandarte. During the short stay of the Germans in Kharkov, the central Red Square was renamed

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Michael Wittmann (in the tower) talking with Colonel-General Guderian and SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling

spare the Leibstandarte. It was there that the "tigers" from the heavy company of the SS division were stationed. Guderian personally met with Michael Wittmann, examined his tank and answered questions about the prospects for the development of tank forces. Wittmann himself, in turn, spoke about the modern tactics of conducting tank battles. The high-profile visits to the company did not end there. On April 5, 1943, Colonel-General Model arrived there.

It was on these days that another five new "tigers" were delivered to the company. This fact is noteworthy, if only because Wittmann eventually moved from the R21U tank to the Tiger. In the course of the reshuffles that took place, he was appointed commander of the 3rd Tiger Platoon. It was from this moment that we can talk about the beginning of his career as the most talented and famous tanker of the Second World War. From the replenishment received by Leibshtan

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dart", ten people were sent to the company of heavy tanks. Among them were SS Unterscharführers Heinz Werner and Hans Rosenberger. Later, both became commanders of tank crews in a platoon of medium tanks. Oberscharführer Marten and Scharführer Letsch were also in the company. Later they will become commanders of the "tigers". In addition, Schutze Walter Lau and Erman Gross, who were initially loaders, should be singled out from the replenishment.

It was after the appearance of the replenishment of the Panzerschütze that Alfred Lunzer was admitted to the Kharkov hospital: "The Russians looked after us. There were a lot of fleas and lice. Beds with straw mattresses were often stained with blood. My leg was taken care of, but it was only a few weeks before I was discharged, and even then my leg didn't perform well. I returned to my unit only in May. At that time we were standing to the north of Kharkov. There I met my new commander. Unterscharführer Blase. He came to us from the Luftwaffe. There were no more RU tanks in our company, only "tigers". My leg gave me a lot of discomfort

Guderian's visit to Kharkov. In a black tank uniform, Hauptsturmführer Kling

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stay. When I found myself in the sun, ichor flowed from it like sweat. When I later ended up in a field hospital in Kremenchug, the doctor referred me to a special skin clinic. They put uniform experiments on me, but all of them did not give any results! Only once did a senior medical officer, Felix Krull (really a man from Thomas Mann's novels), say to me: "I got this medicine from the army medical depots in Kyiv." Within a few days my dermatitis was cured."

In a thin stream from Germany, the wounded from the "old fighters" began to return. One of the last to return to his unit was Untersturmführer "Gannes" Philipsen, who was wounded near Kharkov on March 1, 1943. Already in the hospital, on 20 March he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. He was the first member of a heavy tank company to receive this award. On April 20 (Hitler's birthday) he wrote to his parents from the hospital in Meiningen. His letter began with a retrospective look into the pre-war past, when he was one of the regional leaders of the Hitler Youth: "For me, as the leader of the Pymphs! this day was the most beautiful in my life. Every year on this day, new, still very young boys joined our group, and the older ones left it.

— I was proud of them. If you look at them now, at these yesterday's boys, they will turn out to be the best soldiers at the front. There is nothing that they, due to their training, could not handle. We turned our weapons against Bolshevism, as our Motherland wished. But now I remember our days at home and at school. And I clearly see that the boys, whose bodies and souls we have strengthened, have become the hope of our nation. Yesterday I listened with delight to how the imperial leader

1Pimf is a member of the Jungvolk organization, the younger age structure of the Hitler Youth.

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Michael Wittmann with SS-Untersturmführer Hannes Philipsen (left) and Knight's Cross holder Alfred Günther

Youth father Artur Aksman accepted ten-year-old boys and girls in Marinburg as Pymphas and Jungmedels. And at night I listened to the Fuhrer's speech. From time to time I return to them in the past, to these pymphs. But the war taught us to think about other things, but our idealism only grew stronger. My thoughts return more and more often to my comrades-in-arms and to the day when we became the Fuhrer's personal bodyguards! My leg was taken out of plaster yesterday, now you can see that my knee is really healing. The day after tomorrow I will be allowed to try to get on my feet so that I can walk myself. I want that when Matthias comes to visit me, I would meet him standing on the balcony or sitting in the garden.”

If we talk about the “acquisitions” of a company of heavy tanks, it is necessary to mention Sepp Hefner. He arrived at the Leibstandarte directly from the Maybach factory, where he was in charge of the engines of the Tigers. At first he was a “blue” mechanic (that is, not part of the crew), but very quickly he earned a black tank uniform with SS Oberscharführer buttonholes. Hafner was greatly appreciated for his extensive technical knowledge. In his own way, he was an irreplaceable person.

How did the heavy company of the Leibstandarte live in the spring of 1943? Twenty-year-old Schütze Walter Lau, one of the ten “newcomers”, recalled his arrival in Kharkov: “A few days after the re-capture of Kharkov, on March 15, we, the Leibstandarte replenishment company, under the command of Sturmbannführer Siebken, were quartered near the square Leibstandarte. After the capture of Kharkov, that is how they began to call the local Red Square. I remember this place very well, because in the mornings we did drills on this square. The replacement company with its four platoons (anti-aircraft gunners, artillerymen and two infantry platoons) was a very motley company. The company commander, Haupt-Sturmführer Stamp, was a veteran of the Leibstandarte. However, non-commissioned officers, especially senior ranks,

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Inspection of the “tigers” on the Red Square of Kharkov, which received the name Leibstandarte Square during the occupation

were what were called “the last sons.” They were recruited from all combat units to be sent to the reserve battalion, where they prepared reinforcements. Almost all of them were awarded the Iron Crosses and signs “For the attack.” Between August and December 1942, in France, they literally made real soldiers out of us. There was a proverb among them: “The SS soldier is a precious stone that needs to be cut.” But there we were only replenishment. Many of us have repeatedly asked in writing or orally to be sent to the front as part of the panzergrenadier units or to the reconnaissance

Battalion "Tank" Kurt Mayer. And in March 1943, we achieved what we wanted. Approximately one hundred of us were sent to combat units to make up for the losses suffered by the Leibstandarte during the battle for Kharkov.

Almost all of them were sent to the tank regiment of Sturmbannführer Schoenberger, who personally greeted us during the formation in the northern suburbs of Kharkov. At this time, his adjutant was SS-Obersturmführer Rudolf von Ribbentrop. It was he who distributed the replenishment. Most of the recruits got into the 2nd tank

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company, but ten - in a separate company, where the "tigers" were in service. I will describe the case when I first encountered this tank. It was in February. At that moment we were somewhere under Valki. It was some kind of village near the main road. At that moment, "tigers" were driving past the house. One of them broke, and we were able to see with our own eyes this colossus, which was in service with the Leibstandarte. But no less than we were struck by the young blond commander of this tank. The SS-Untersturmführer, who was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class, took over the job himself and helped with the repairs. Three weeks later I learned that it was Helmut Wendorff. At that time I had no idea that later I would have to accompany him on his last journey. But I will return back to the northern suburbs of Kharkov. For two or three weeks Rottenführer Svitsi and Sturmmann Schamp taught us how to handle the RPI tank. SS-Unterscharführers Staudegger and Owl have already carried out training on the RU and the Tiger. We had a strict daily routine: 6 hours of getting up, 7 hours of morning formation, then two hours of physical exercises, under the supervision of Obersturmführer Schutz, and, finally, the development of tanks, which took place in the platoons of SS-Untersturmführers Wendorf and Wittmann. They themselves taught the intricacies of tank battle tactics. They sat down next to us and drew on the sand the action plans of individual tanks and tank platoons. Then we studied the features of armament and maintenance of tanks. As a result, even in a dream we should have been able to change the caterpillar or

change chassis.

At that time, the Leibstandarte received a large number of men from the Luftwaffe. The heavy tank company was no exception. Here, such recruits were called "Hermann Goering's offering" in a piece. But mostly the former "pilots" were used in the infantry units of the SS. They had to deserve more to be in tank units. Such an appointment was a kind of encouragement. But at the same time

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SS-Obersturmführer Waldemar Schütz and Hauptscharführer Habermann

the company of heavy tanks did not receive at its disposal a single non-commissioned officer of the reenlisted.

On April 29, 1943, a heavy SS company was sent north outside Kharkov, but the plans of the command soon changed, and on May 5, 1943, it was returned back to the city. In those days, its employees were engaged in the usual routine business. So, for example, on May 2, navigator Shamp had to find spare parts for the tank's broken fuel pump at all costs. As a result, he was forced to leave the unit, where he returned only on May 5th. Everyone went about their business: technicians repaired tanks, Wittmann and Wendorf taught recruits the basics of tank tactics. The reinforcements, especially the young soldiers, were literally bewitched by Michael Wittmann. The lessons he gave, drawing diagrams in the sand, demonstrated his extraordinary abilities. He skillfully combined in his constructions features of the landscape, speed

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May 1943. near Kharkov. SS-Obersturmführer Waldemar Schütz inspecting a company

attacks, angle of fire, surprise factor. For the new recruits, it all seemed like a very difficult science. But Wittmann did not give dry information; he tried to accompany all his "lectures" with a lively description and vivid examples.

To simplify the learning process, Shamp found an elderly Austrian who had been living in Kharkov for a long time. He began to carve small models of tanks from wood, which enlivened the preparation process. As payment for this work, he was given provisions and gasoline. In addition, the Austrian bred bees, and therefore Champ was sometimes able to get honey for company officers.

One case concerns Gustav Svitsi, orderly of the company commander and translator. At some point, he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class and promoted to the rank of SS Unterscharführer. This was done for his merit when he commanded the P711 tank. Once, in a conversation with his friend Shamp, who has repeatedly taught

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fought in battles against the T-34, he suggested that the R7Sh is much more important for combat operations than the "tigers". As a result, Switzy came to the conclusion that he should have been awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Champ jokingly suggested discussing this issue with the company commander. Switzy, who did not understand humor, went to Kling. But he soon returned very disappointed. SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling did not even want to listen to his lengthy reflections.

If we talk about some everyday sketches, then we can say that Helmut Wendorff and Michael Wittmann often dropped in on a visit to the holder of the Knight's Cross, SS Hauptsturmführer Alfred Günther. "Fredy" Günther was the commander of a battery of assault guns. They had been friends with Wittmann since 1940, when he was not yet a tanker.

The recruits rarely saw the commander of a heavy tank company. To some extent, Kling was never able to get rid of pre-war attitudes. He believed that the most important thing was discipline. As a result, he contacted only with officers and non-commissioned officers, occasionally asking how the training of reinforcements went. In principle, Kling's power was based only on the authority he enjoyed in the company. However, he lacked mental alertness. In many ways, he relied on the traditional attitudes of the army: strict subordination

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May 1943. near Kharkov.

nenie and resigned execution of orders.

SS-Obersturmführer Waldemar Schütz inspecting a company

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At the end of May, a new replenishment arrived in the company. It was thirty soldiers and non-commissioned officers recruited from the ranks of the Luftwaffe. This time they included over-enlisted men who didn't have to explain everything from scratch. The most telling example is Rudy Hirshel. He was only nineteen years old when he was in the 71st Aviation Regiment. On March 29, 1943, he was suddenly transferred from the Luftwaffe to the Waffen-SS, and on April 2 he was already in Kharkov, where he fell into a company of heavy tanks. The question arises, what could he do in tank units, and even without lengthy training? In fact, in the role of a radio operator-shooter, he did not need any new special skills and knowledge.



Around the same time, heavy tank company personnel received new uniforms. It, including caps, was cut from dark green camouflage fabric. New work overalls appeared, which were a single piece of clothing. They became very popular, as they, unlike the black SS tank uniform, were less visible dirt and oil stains. However, Wittmann and Wendorf themselves in those days preferred to walk around in the gray uniform of officers of assault guns. The maintenance platoon converted several 3-ton Opel trucks to the needs of the company. One of them became a duty room, the other a radio room, the third - an impromptu warehouse. After this practice took root, the MAN 5-ton truck was turned into a spare parts warehouse.

for tanks.

At some point, the commander of the regiment, SS Obersturmbannführer Schoenberger, appeared at the location of the company. He wanted to personally check how the training of new recruits was going. When he noticed that Champ, who had the rank of only an SS navigator, was a tank commander, he was quite surprised. To the question: "How did it happen?" - Hauptsturmführer Kling himself hastened to answer. He is for

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revealed that he personally made the decision to make him commander of the tank crew, taking into account the considerable experience of Champ.

Weeks of quiet life replaced the week. The recruits learned the basics of tank operations, but it was clear to everyone that a major German offensive was just around the corner. However, each time the start date was postponed to a later date. At that moment, many experienced officers, non-commissioned officers and privates appeared in the Leibstandarte, which allowed the command to form another Waffen-SS division from them, which was called the Hitler Youth. Those who got into its composition had a lot of work to do. The SS officers took command of the new units on 13 May 1943. With the transfer, they were expected to rise in rank, but at the same time, a huge responsibility fell on their shoulders - after all, the SS division "Hitler Youth" had not only to be staffed, but also to prepare it before the start of the German summer offensive. This had to be done in the shortest possible time.

As a result, the 1st tank battalion of the Leibstandarte, commanded by Sturmbannführer Max Wünsche, was to become the basis for the formation of a tank regiment of the Hitler Youth division. A new tank battalion, just formed in Germany, was sent to replace it. It was equipped with another tank novelty of the German military industry -

Young soldiers of the Leibstandarte with Panther-type tanks. "replenish" their diet with fresh June 4, 1943 Sepp Diet - chicken eggs

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Rich resigned as commander of the Leibstandarte division. He was to lead the newly formed [SS Panzer Corps, which was to include the Leibstandarte division. The new division commander was SS Standartenführer Theodor ("Geddy") Wisch.

Transformations also took place in the company of heavy tanks itself. From the 4th company, it turned into the 13th heavy company of the SS Panzer Regiment "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler". Why the 13th number was chosen for her is still unknown. It is possible that this was to emphasize her special character, since she was not part of any of the regimental battalions. The 4th tank company itself became part of the 1st battalion of the SS tank regiment. A distinctive feature of the new unit was that, as a rule, not numbers were drawn on the turrets of tanks, but only the company number - 13. It is worth adding to this that by the summer of 1943, the "tigers" received multi-color camouflage colors, which was supposed to help them merge with the colorful Ukrainian landscape.

On June 18, 1943, recent immigrants from the Luftwaffe were appointed commanders of tank crews: Unterscharführers Enderl, Bernhardt, Langner and Hunerbein.

Despite the strictness of the training and education of recruits, many of them later noted that this did not cancel purely human relations. During one of the training sessions, Untersturmführer Wendorf ordered the tanks to be camouflaged. "In these conditions, camouflage coloring will be in place." The commander of the regiment, Obersturmbannführer Schoenberger, who caught this scene, said in a stern voice: "Do not forget that you are an Unter Sturmfuehrer, and not an SS navigator." But when Wendorf came to the conclusion that the recruits had successfully completed all the tasks, he produced carried: "Attention! Lie down everyone ... Now you can smoke "

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"Tiger" with tail number \$33 (Oberscharführer Georgo Lötsch) in characteristic camouflage coloring

Michael Wittmann also received "advice" from the commander of an SS Panzer Regiment. As Walter Lau recalled this episode of the Panzerschütz: "In May we trained outside Kharkov. The preparation included movement, march formation, formation changes, wedge formation, shooting at a large immovable target. I remember a conversation with Obersturmbannführer Schoenberger, who was present at our classes. The crews gathered around him in a semicircle. He asked Michael Wittmann: "What will you do in conditions when you are attacked from a distance of 1500 meters by about thirty T-34% Wittmann, without hesitation, answered: "I will pick up speed and attack them." Schoenberger smiled and corrected: "You should take cover and wait for reinforcements."

Traditionally, in the "tiger" ammunition was designed for 92 shells. But one of the employees of the 13th heavy company (his name remained unknown) proposed to slightly modernize the racks of ammunition holders, which

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would increase them to 120 shells. For this rationalization proposal, he was encouraged by the company commander.

Meanwhile, the date of a major German offensive was approaching. On June 30, 1943, the 13th heavy company of the Leibstandarte moved north. But trouble struck almost immediately. On the very first day of the journey, the company commander's tank broke down. As a result, navigator Champ took him in tow. On July 4, the commander's "tiger" (tail number 1321) received a new engine. The movement continued. The order was given to maintain radio silence. After that, it became clear to everyone that an offensive was coming. |

### Chapter 3 OPERATION CITADEL

Since the events associated with the Battle of Kursk are covered in detail in many books and scientific publications, we will designate the strategic situation that had developed by the summer of 1943 with only general strokes. The recapture of Kharkov by the German troops created a large ledge on the Eastern Front, approximately 200 kilometers wide. This ledge (from the Soviet positions an arc) separated from each other the formations of the Army Group "South" and "Center". Operation "Citadel" was designed to eliminate this "roughness" in the front line. As is known, the German command planned to cut off the units of the Red Army stationed there by means of two powerful flank attacks, encircle them and liquidate them in the next "cauldron". The blow, inflicted from the north and south, was supposed to lead to a large-scale defeat of the Red Army. In this situation, the Leibstandarte was to advance from its positions in a northerly direction. This breakthrough was supposed to be carried out with the close interaction of the three divisions of the Waffen-SS: "Leibstandarte", "Reich" and "Totenkopf".

The Fourth Panzer Army (XXXX - 48th Tank Corps and E - 52nd Army Corps) was to destroy the Soviet troops in the Kursk area, which was an integral part of the Citadel operation plan.

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On X Day, the tank army was to break through the Soviet defense line on the Belgorod-Korovino front. After this breakthrough for a period of X + 1 day, the 48th Panzer Corps was to capture the hills on both sides of Butovo and south of Gertsovka.

After the alleged crushing of the second line of the Soviet defense and the destruction of the tank forces aimed at intercepting the German wedge, it was planned to move towards Kursk, bypassing Oboyan from the east. At this time, Kempf's army group was to move further east. Its left wing (6th Panzer Division) was to advance from Belgorod through the village of Sabynino in the direction of Prokhorovka.

After intensive artillery preparation on X-day, the second SS Panzer Corps was to launch an offensive on the Berezov-Zadelnoye sector of the front. In this case, the attack was to be carried out by the forces of the Leibstandarte, Reich and Totenkopf, which were to act as a battle group consisting of approximately one third of the 167th Infantry Division. One of the divisions was supposed to break into the operational rear of the Soviet troops near Zhuravlinoye, which was supposed to open the way for everyone else from Belgorod to Yakovlevo. After that, the SS Panzer Corps had to rapidly move forward in the Luchki-Yakovlevo sector. At the same time, the 167th Infantry Division, located in Vorskla, was supposed to cover the left flank of the SS Panzer Corps. It had to be ready at any moment to move northeast along the banks of the Psel River. |

The task assigned to the Leibstandarte was outlined in Order No. 17 of the command of the SS Panzer Corps. "The Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, reinforced by the 315th Grenadier Regiment and the 2nd Battalion of the 2358th Artillery Regiment, attacks enemy positions along the Tomarovka-Bykovka road, after which he turns his left flank in a northerly direction near Kamenny Log and Zadelny,

which must be taken as quickly as possible. After that, he should move east from Yakovlevo. Its subsequent offensive task is the operational forcing of the Psel River in the area of Mikhailovka-Klyuchki. After breaking through the enemy defenses, the 55th rocket artillery regiment and the 861st field artillery battalion are placed at the disposal of the Leibstandarte command. The offensive of the SS division, as well as the entire SS Panzer Corps, will be supported from the air by a large part of the ISh Aviation Corps.

When darkness fell over the positions, Hitler's order was announced aloud in all units: "Soldiers! Today you are launching a great offensive battle that may have a decisive influence on the outcome of the war as a whole. With your victory, the conviction of the futility of any resistance to the German armed forces will be strengthened stronger than before. In addition, a new cruel defeat of the Russians will further shake the faith in the possibility of the success of Bolshevism, which has already been shaken in many formations of the Soviet Armed Forces. In the same way as in the last great war, their faith in victory, no matter what, will disappear.

The Russians achieved this or that success primarily with the help of their tanks. My soldiers! Now, finally, you have better tanks than the Russians. Their seemingly inexhaustible human masses have become so thinned in the two-year struggle that they are forced to call on the youngest and oldest. Our infantry, as always, is superior to the Russians to the same extent as our artillery, our tank destroyers, our tankers, our sappers and, of course, our aviation.

The mighty blow that will overtake the Soviet armies this morning must shake them to their foundations. And you should know that everything can depend on the outcome of this battle. As a soldier, I clearly understand what I demand from you. Ultimately, we will achieve victory, no matter how brutal and difficult this or that individual battle may be.

German Motherland — your wives, daughters and sons, united selflessly, meet enemy air strikes and at the same time work tirelessly for the sake of victory; they look with fervent hope at you, my soldiers. Adolf Hitler"

What were the tasks of the 13th heavy company of the "Leibstandarte"? On the first day of the offensive, after the Soviet anti-tank nests were destroyed and the front line was broken, the strike group was to turn northeast towards Bukovka to capture a bridgehead on the banks of the Psel River. After that, on the night of June 5, the 13th heavy tank company was to link up with the assault gun battalion and move along the road to Hill 228.6.

On the night of July 5, 1943, eleven vehicles ready for the offensive reached control point 222.3 and took up positions on the road leading from Tomarovka to Bukovka. Preparations for the offensive began at 03:15. Together with the assault guns, the "tigers" were ready to start moving down the Tomarovka-Bukovka road in order to reach Hill 228.6 as quickly as possible. But for all the Germans, the anticipatory Soviet artillery preparation came as a big surprise. As you know, the Soviet command knew about the plans of the Germans.

Panzerschütze Lau described the Tigers' approach to the starting point and the hours of waiting for the offensive as follows: "Operation Citadel was of great importance even for me personally. The fact is that it was my baptism of fire. Moreover, it happened in a powerful "tiger". Shortly before the offensive, I was assigned to load the crew of my friend Staudegger. Our platoon leader was "Bubi" Wendorff. We left the collection point on June 30, 1943. In this regard, I would like to specifically mention the very friendly farewell to the local population. During the few weeks that we were stationed in this area, we have developed excellent relations

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tel. I remember how we made three stops along the way until we got to the place. The first time it was pouring rain, and we were forced to take cover under the tank. Our commander Untersturmführer Wendorf, Heinz Buchner, Franz Staudegger and several others fit there. Then Wendorff and Büchner shared their impressions of their stay in Napolas.

The next evening found us in the middle of a wheat field, where we bivouacked. Then Wendorf applied his traditional practice. He laid the platoon on their stomachs in a semicircle so that the heads were directed to the center. As expected, he encouraged us to sing. We sang our evening song. The next time we stopped in an elongated village. There the platoon commander said that we had arrived at the scene. There he outlined to us in general terms the meaning of the operation. I don't know if someone read Hitler's order to him or if he also learned about it from words! We should have attacked from the south while

! By all appearances, it does not mean an appeal to the soldiers, which was read out on the night before the offensive, but a separate order addressed to the officers: "My commanders! I gave the order for the first offensive battle of the year. You and your subordinate soldiers are entrusted with the task of achieving its successful implementation at all costs. The significance of the first offensive operation of this year is exceptionally great. This beginning new German operation will not only strengthen our own people, make an impression on the rest of the world, but above all will give the German soldier himself a new faith. The faith of our allies in ultimate victory will be strengthened. and neutral states will be forced to exercise caution and restraint. The defeat that Russia will suffer as a result of this offensive should wrest the initiative from the Soviet leadership in the near future, if it does not have a decisive influence on the subsequent course of events. The armies intended for the offensive are equipped with all types of weapons. who were able to create the spirit of German invention and German technology. The number of personnel has been raised to the highest possible limit for us. This and subsequent operations are provided sufficiently

ammunition and fuel. Our aviation will smash, by concentrating all its forces, the enemy's air power, it will help to destroy the firing positions of the enemy's artillery and, through continuous activity, will help the infantrymen, facilitating their operations. That is why I am addressing you, my commanders, on the eve of this battle. For in the fourth year of the war, more than ever, the outcome of the battle depends on you, the commanders, on your leadership. from outgoing

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the troops of the other army group were to move towards us from the north. Already from the words of the Führer and the Commander-in-Chief it followed that this was a decisive battle. The lofty emotions and hopes at such a decisive hour were somewhat dissonant with the indigestion in my stomach. Moreover, it was supposed to be my first fight. We reached our initial positions for the offensive on the night of June 5, 1943.

The first units of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment actually launched an offensive at 23:15. They were to capture the Soviet positions west of Yakhontov and approach Hill 228.6. In 1 hour 33 minutes (already June 5) Obersturmführer Kark (9th company of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment) was killed in a fierce battle. Fighting began in Streletsky itself. The Germans were able to gain a foothold only in the northern part of this settlement. At the same time, the Soviet units launched a counterattack from the area of height 228.6. The Germans managed to repel it only at 2 hours and 15 minutes. But the actual offensive began at 3 o'clock. At 03:15, the "tigers" were already able to break through to a height of 228.6.

Both panzergrenadier regiments of the Leibstandarte went on the offensive at 04:50. At the head of each of them moved shock battalions. Their goal was a height of 220.5. During the offensive, it turned out that the Red Army units were able not only to mine the approaches to it, but also created a defense in depth on this sector of the front. Dug up the tower into the ground

from your uplifting and striving to move forward, from your unstoppable inexorable will to win and, if necessary, also from your personal heroic actions. I know that you have earned great appreciation already in the preparation of this battle, and I thank you for that. However, you yourself should know that it is the success of this first great battle in 1943 that will matter more. than any ordinary victory. Under these circumstances, I have no doubt that I, gentlemen commanders, can rely on you. Adolf Hitler. This order should be destroyed after being announced at the headquarters of the division.

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Liu T-34 and camouflaged anti-tank guns actually stopped the advance of the "Tigers" and German assault guns. Just before Hill 220.5, the German grenadiers ran into well-fortified Soviet trenches.

As a result, a company of "tigers" received an order to break through the Soviet positions to the south and southeast of Bykov.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling radioed the order to all tank crews: "Tanks forward." At high speed, eleven "tigers" rushed north. Crew commanders could determine the distance to the Soviet positions only by the flashes of anti-tank guns. Moreover, if the gun did not fire, then in the dark the German tankers could not notice it, especially if the gun was camouflaged. Never before had German tank forces encountered so many anti-tank guns and T-34s dug into the ground.

The Soviet troops skillfully used the terrain and the specifics of the landscape to skillfully hide their anti-tank weapons. The camouflaged Soviet anti-tank guns were very dangerous for the tanks, but the commanders of the crews and gunners sitting in the Tigers were able to figure them out by flashes in the dark. For a while, heavy tanks need

had to stop to fire a shot. Sturmman Balthazar Woll, gunner-gunner in the crew of Michael Wittmann, turned the tank turret to the left. Through the periscope sight, the Soviet gun looked very menacing. But the experienced artilleryman Woll destroyed it with the first shot. At the same moment, still to the left, he saw another reflection from a shot from an anti-tank gun. Having reacted immediately, a small native of the Saarland hit this target as well. Several accurate shots were also fired from other "tigers". As a result, the line of defense of anti-tank guns was broken through. The advance continued.

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#### Panzergrenadiers attack

Soon the first T-34s appeared. There were about a dozen of them. In the most favorable position was the tank of Hauptsturmführer Kling, whose gunner Sturmman Warmbrunn knocked out two Soviet tanks within a minute. Several more accurate shots were fired from other "tigers". The remaining T-34s chose to retreat. New unexpected "surprises" lay in an extremely extensive system of trenches. Bright red meter-long spears of fire suddenly rushed across the battlefield. They made certain areas burn and smoke. For the German grenadiers, these Soviet automatic flamethrowers were a fearsome weapon. They didn't even dare to approach him. Kling directed his "Tiger" to one of these bunkers, in which a flamethrower was installed. Shot with a high-explosive projectile, and until recently the impregnable fortification was destroyed. During the first day of the offensive, Kling's crew (more precisely, his artillery gunner Warmbrunn) destroyed nine flamethrowers, blew up

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seven bunkers, four T-34s and nineteen 76.2 mm anti-tank guns were knocked out.

The Tigers continued their advance as soon as the sappers made passages in the minefields and threw bridges over the anti-tank ditches. Soon they were near the Soviet positions at the height, which bristled with the barrels of guns. It was seen how T-34s dug into the ground up to the very turret were sending shell after shell into the German tanks.

Hauptsturmführer Kling's presentation to the German Golden Cross stated: "When the grenadiers' offensive began to fade, Hauptsturmführer Kling decided to break through the mined territory with the forces of a tank company, despite the massive shelling from anti-tank guns. Attacking with the forces of eleven tanks, he paved the way to the heights step by step. Four times he had to change the tank, and, finally, with the last remaining tanks at his disposal, he was able to break through the enemy defense line.

Soviet gunners allowed the "tigers" to approach at a distance of almost 20 meters. The fight was very bloody.

After German support from rocket artillery installations was provided at 11:45, the "tigers", assault guns and units of the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment, after five hours of incessant fighting, were able to capture Hill 220.5. The losses of the Soviet side were huge. It is difficult to say how many in total the crews of the "Tigers" managed to knock out the T-34 and destroy the anti-tank guns. At 1230 hours, a significant part of the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment under the command of Obersturmbannführer Hugo Kraas reached a height of 215.4, which was located 2.5 kilometers south of Bykovka. This was the goal of the first day of the offensive. On the same day, both SS Panzer Grenadier regiments entered Bykovka.

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"Leibstandarte" advances on Kursk

Street fighting did not start, the Red Army units preferred to withdraw. The German panzergrenadiers tried to pursue the retreating Red Army soldiers.

Parts of the "Leibstandarte" for the first day of the offensive destroyed a large number of Soviet tanks. By the evening of June 5, the 1st division of the Waffen-SS approached Yakovlevo, on the right side this settlement was bypassed by units of the SS division "Reich". During these battles, Untersturmführer Wendorff was wounded. Wittmann's crew was able to destroy seven tanks and seven anti-tank guns on the first day of fighting alone.

Panzerschütze Walter Lau recalled the first day of Operation Citadel: "When the artillery shelling began, our Tigers had to cross a small stream. Considerable skills were required from the driver, but the design of the "tigers" simplified everything. Somewhere there was dawn. The "Tigers" moved across a wide plain. In those final minutes before the start of the offensive, the volleys of rocket launchers and the rumble of dive bombers seemed very impressive to us. For the first time in my life I saw

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a solid wall of smoke and such a deafening noise that the rocket artillery batteries produced. When the noise died down, and the smoke fell, squadrons of "pieces" appeared.

Simultaneously

the tanks moved on. After we had driven a few hundred meters, we had to stop for the first time in front of an anti-tank ditch. Frey's regiment - the Leibstandarte Panzergrenadiers (1st Panzergrenadier Regiment under Soviet SS artillery fire) immediately captured the ditch, and the sappers began to build bridges across it. The first tank to cross the ditch was commanded by Untersturmführer Wittmann. It was followed by the "tiger" of Untersturmführer Wendorff. During the offensive, Staudegger was our commander. But since Wendorff's tank obviously had technical problems, he moved to us, and Staudegger temporarily left the tank. Forcing the ditch was very difficult. We had to wait for some time until the sappers make a semblance of a crossing over it. Finally, they coped with their task, and the company, which formed a wedge, continued its offensive. The defenders opened heavy fire on us. My condition could hardly be called ideal. I don't know if it was fear, but either way, I had a strange feeling in my stomach. That day we were hit for the first time.

I obviously did not have enough experience to say what we were knocked out of. It is possible that an anti-tank rifle simultaneously hit the commander's cupola-cabin and the suspension of the rollers. My state of health noticeably deteriorated when we saw that Untersturmführer Wendorff was covered in blood. Apparently he was badly wounded. Thank God, it

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It seemed that he had been cut in the face by shrapnel from a broken viewing device, but he was not seriously injured. I thought that we should leave the car, and began to open the escape hatch in the tower. When it became clear that Wendorff was not injured, but only scratched, and the equipment was slightly damaged, we could not close the hatch from the inside.

At this moment, a conversation arose between Wendorff and the commander of the sapper company. I remember him well, because the "stupid ass" that I was didn't have enough strength to close the hatch. My state of health worsened utterly when the hatch fell right on the hand of the commander of the sappers. We remained motionless on the main defensive line. Obersturmführer Schütze's tank stopped near us. A shell fired from an anti-tank gun hit just in the viewing hole near the loader. Klaus Byurvenich, a young blond-haired guy, who loads this crew of Panzerschütze. was badly wounded.

Now I have received an order to get over from Ober-Sturmführer Schütler's tank. It upset me to the end, so

SS Obersturmführer Schutz at the Ukrainian hut

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how he was a friend of the company commander, and his gunner Unterscharführer Werner Wend was a very experienced gunner. But I actually had no time to think, as the tank wedge, led by Hauptsturmführer Kling, continued its advance. We attacked the height behind the anti-tank ditch and almost in the blink of an eye we used up all the ammunition. I remember that from morning to afternoon we stopped three times to replenish our ammunition. Now it is very easy to calculate how many shells were carried by the loaders and how many guts these shells released. A strange feeling in my stomach left me, but I was physically exhausted by the endless loading of 88-mm shells and the terrible heat in the tank. However, by the evening, all the loaders from the crews of the "Tigers" felt like that. That night we fell asleep in the open air right behind the tanks."

On the evening of the difficult first day of the offensive, the tank crews gathered to discuss the combat events. Night came very soon. Here another incident occurred, which characterizes Michael Wittmann in the best possible way. The young tanker was put on duty, but tired of his first battle, he fell asleep. Wittmann found him dozing at his post. Without even making a reprimand or reprimand, he replaced the young tanker on duty. Wittmann understood how much sleep the recruits needed. The next day, he did not report this incident anywhere. This shows once again that Wittmann considered himself responsible for the young soldiers. But not all the crews managed to rest that night.

Already at night, Franz Staudegger tried to catch up with his company. He slowly drove his "Tiger" along a narrow forest road. In order to find a way in pitch darkness, Staudegger opened the hatch of the tower and tried to see the road. For some time the tank rolled through the forest. The silence of the night was broken only by the roar of its engine.

Suddenly, Staudegger noticed some sparks that

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rye flickered directly in front of the car. He immediately ordered the driver to stop. Now he could make out the contours of the tank. Sparks flew from his exhaust pipe. It was only by a miracle that a collision was avoided. Staudegger jumped down from the tower to ask the tank commander why he was standing in the middle of the road in terrible darkness, preventing him from passing.

The commander of another tank was also standing on the turret and smoking a cigarette. Staudegger could clearly see the flame of a cigarette butt. He must have been quite surprised too, because he did not hear the approach of the "tiger". When he asked something, the German was stunned - he heard Russian speech. Staudegger stood almost alone in front of the Soviet tank. Having mastered his fear, he reached for his belt, took out a hand grenade and threw it into the open hatch of a Soviet tank. Rushing to the side, Staudegger noticed that there was one more behind the first tank. The explosion rocked the T-34. The Untersturmführer tried to warn his crew, but he had no time for more. Acting extremely quickly, Staudegger rushed to the second tank. When there was an explosion, its hatch opened, apparently, the tankers wanted to see what happened in the night. At that moment, the German threw a second grenade there. There was an explosion. It turned out that Staudegger was able to single-handedly destroy two tanks in a matter of minutes. In this situation, he was saved by the fact that, as a former infantryman, Staudegger was used to keeping several hand grenades with him and knew how to handle them. When he climbed back into the tank, his crew continued on their way to the 13th tank company. The next day, SS Untersturmführer Franz Staudegger was presented with the Iron Cross First Class for bravery and efficiency.



On the same night, Soviet troops retreated to new lines, which were located east of Yakovlevo. Height 243.2 was considered one of the central points of these fortifications. On July 6, 1943, the divisions "Leib

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Shtandart" and "Reich" was tasked to break through to the south-east of Yakovlevo. A company of "tigers" was supposed to take a well-fortified height of 243.2. The attack began early in the morning. The units of the Red Army traditionally put up fierce resistance. On board the tank of the commander of the 1st platoon, Obersturmführer Schütz, was the military correspondent Joachim Fernau, already familiar to the SS. During the attack, a shell hit the tank. At first, Schutz thought that both of his legs had been blown off. But fortunately, he was wrong. During this battle, many young tankers struggled to cope with their fear. So, for example, the driver of this crew, Johannes Graf, sang Viennese songs, which was clearly audible over the radio. At that time, SS navigator Rolf Schamp commanded the "Tiger" 1324. Its crew consisted of navigator Siegfried Jung (gunner), Panzerschütze Ivanitz (radio operator), Reinhardt Wenzel (loader), Franz Elmer (driver). During the attack, this "tiger" ran into a mine and was damaged. On that day, many German tanks and vehicles were blown up by Soviet mines, which were strewn in abundance in those parts.

SS Hauptsturmführer Kling, with the three "Tigers" remaining at his disposal, was still able to capture Hill 243.2 by noon. This tactical success became a condition for the pursuit of the retreating units of the Red Army. But this situation did not last long. At 13:15, Soviet troops from Yakovlevo launched an attack on the positions of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. It was supported by 38 tanks. The 13th heavy company of the Leibstandarte managed to repel this attack. Together with the Leibstandarte tank group, eight Soviet tanks were destroyed, after which the Red Army turned back.

Now Kling carefully weighed the possibilities of his several Tigers. In the presentation of Hauptsturmführer Kling to the Golden German Cross, say

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moose: "He immediately began to pursue the enemy. Ignoring the danger, he led the tank group forward, after which he was able to capture the surroundings of the hill to the west of Prokhorovka. Our tank wedge penetrated 60-70 kilometers into enemy positions. In two days of fighting, his company destroyed fifty T-34s and one KV-1 each! and KV-2. Hauptsturmführer Kling himself made a great contribution to this

SS sturmmann Walter Koch, one of Michael Wittmann's crew succeed by knocking out nine  
tan

enemy's kov".

Michael Wittmann also took part with his platoon in this battle. His crew was able to knock out several tanks. But Wittmann was not so lucky that day. His tank was blown up by a mine and remained in place with a caterpillar torn in half. It was hit by Soviet shells several times. As a result, the radio operator's machine gun was mangled and the manhole cover was damaged. Leading Walter Koch was wounded by several fragments in the head. In this critical situation, Wittmann did not lose his temper and remained cool. This confidence was transferred to the crew members. They knew help was on the way. On that day, SS-Untersturmführer Brandt towed the "limping" "tiger" and pulled it out from under Soviet fire. After that, suggestive Max Gaube joined Wittmann's crew.

On that day, many crews were lucky: Wittmann, Brandt, Höld, Lötsch — they were able to get out alive from the battlefield. In those hours the sky was filled with fighters, bombers and attack aircraft. Exactly

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Then Captain Rudel was able to achieve phenomenal success on the experimental Junkers-87, which was armed with two 37 mm underwing cannons.

So far, the "tiger" has demonstrated a convincing superiority over Soviet tanks and anti-tank guns. Despite the fierce resistance of the T-34s dug into the ground and camouflaged anti-tank guns, the Tigers repeatedly broke through the Soviet positions and made passages for the German grenadiers.

Soviet troops used for defense all types of weapons at their disposal, including flamethrowers. On the other hand, T-34s camouflaged as haystacks were no longer a "surprise" for German tanks. Mines caused the most trouble. German sappers had to work around the clock, tirelessly. It was on the mines that the tanks of Unterscharführer Staudegger, and a little later navigator Shamp, were blown up. Sepp Dietrich met with them that evening and asked what they needed. He personally promised them to find the spare parts needed to repair the Tigers as soon as possible. Those days were hot. The tanks were hot.

A loader from the Staudegger crew wrote in those days in his diary: "The first two days of Operation Citadel were a form of horror for the loaders. It was terribly hot, and we had to carry out replenishment of ammunition three or four times a day. And that meant loading 506-0 shells and emptying the tank of spent gun cases. And so almost every five hours. I remember that loaders fell off their feet in the evening. I was one of them."

Another night has come. The crews of the "Tigers" slept either in the open air or in tents. Most of the buildings and structures in the battlefields were destroyed, so most of the tankers preferred to set up an impromptu camp right next to the Tig

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rum. But before starting the rest, the crews had to load shells into the tank, clean the barrel, fill the machine-gun belts with cartridges, fill the fuel tanks with fuel. Usually only one member of the crew was released from these works - the radio operator, who was supposed to get food for his comrades. This was due to the fact that field kitchens were often located at a very remote distance from the front line. As a result, there was no time to wait for their arrival. Crews often used any lull to take a nap. Almost no one was able to sleep during the night.

On June 7, 1943, three T-34s drove into the village of Teterevino, on the armor of which were Soviet infantrymen. A "tiger" blocked their way. In a short battle, all three Soviet tanks were knocked out. The next morning, the Soviet command sent thirty T-34s to Teterevino. The fight started again. During it, the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment succeeded in pushing the Soviet units out of the village. At that moment, units of the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte, with a total strength of about a thousand people, occupied the villages of Pokrovka and Yakovlevo. The next attack of the tank group of the divisions "Leibstandarte" and "Reich", which were supported from the air by attack aircraft and dive bombers, was carried out along the road that connected Teterevino and Prokhorovka. At 07:10, the advancing German units were attacked from the north by twenty T-34s. By noon, during a fierce tank duel, almost all Soviet vehicles were destroyed.

During the offensive, the "tigers" were mistakenly attacked by German aircraft. When bombs began to explode around the tank, Michael Wittmann opened the turret hatch and placed a special identification shield on the stern of the tank, preventing the next "thing" from continuing the air attack it had begun.

By evening, it became clear that the radio operator Panzerschutze Ben-

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Siegfried Fuss with his fiancée. 1944

Dera had to be urgently hospitalized. His face was distorted by unimaginable sizes of flux, after which a terrible temperature rose. So Siegfried Fuss got into Wittmann's crew. Together with "Bobby" Woll (gunner), navigator Karl Lieber (radio operator) and Panzerschütz Max Gaube, he remained in Wittmann's crew until January 1944.

And here is how the events of that day are described by Rolf Ehrhardt, a driver-mechanic from the 7th tank company of the Leibstandarte tank regiment. "The seventh company stands on a wide front, or rather, those combat-ready tanks that remained after the battle on July 6. Somewhere here at a height there is a village Teterevino. Behind us are the smoking remains of the first Russian tank echelon, in front of us is an impenetrable wall - dozens of T-34 tanks of the main echelon, which we were able to destroy later in a cruel, merciless battle. A wall of steel and fire. There, in the very center, the infantry: our grenadiers, cut off by the Russians, who, on the armor of the T-34, burst forward in the heat of the attack.

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A day earlier, Untersturmführer Weiser, the platoon commander, got into my tank, whose car was still being repaired. He has just returned from his wedding leave, he is wearing a full dress uniform, since he has not had time to change into a field uniform. We are looking at wedding photos, everyone is trying to find contact.

My experience as a tank driver consists of only a few days since July 5, from a deafening explosion when I ran over a mine on July 7, and also from several minor combat episodes. The previous day brought nothing exciting. It took a long time to overcome the anti-tank ditch. Until evening, we provided the motorized infantry of the third battalion of the second motorized infantry regiment with night shelters not far from our present position. We stopped on the back slope to spend the night in the usual shelter pits under the pleasant protection of 24 tons of steel. The fact that there is more than a ton of powerful explosives inside, we ignored.

After a very early awakening - exclamations, orders, commands: "Start", "Drive", "To battle". While we were in a hurry to stuff our blankets, Untersturmführer Weiser ran from the command post and shouted: "Hurry! Enemy tanks." There was a bang, and closer than 200 meters away, the first T-34 caught fire.

He was knocked out by a staff tank with a shot from his fifty millimeters. Geper no longer need any orders. Our tank starts to move, and in a few minutes we have knocked out four T-34 tanks, some from a very short distance. The other tanks of the seventh company act in the same way. The situation gradually improved. Words on the radio began to sound like normal orders. At that moment, as far as the eye could see, we were masters of the situation. But what will happen next?

The monotony of orders for countless changes of position is suddenly interrupted. "Georg – Irene," we hear and know that Georg is the call sign of the commander of the first platoon, Obersturmführer Hoffmann. And Irena is the commander

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7th company, Hauptsturmführer. From a few words, the following became clear: a messenger from the infantry reports that Sturmbannführer Peiper, commander of the 3rd battalion of the 2nd regiment, is wounded, surrounded by Russians and asks to be pulled out. Everyone who hears this understands that something must happen. The wall of smoke and fire is the border for friends and foes. We follow every move; the T-34 that broke through would not have gone fifty meters without turning into a sieve. How deep is this smoke zone? Is it possible, under her cover, to approach Peiper's command post? All these questions run through our heads. What's it like now

Hauptsturmführer Thimann, who must decide whom to give the order to rescue the commander? Only one thing is clear - an attempt must be made. Here comes Irena's message to Walter (that's us): "Your position is the most advantageous. Take the liaison to the lead tank and try to free Piper. Go ahead, fuck it! This is your only chance." At the word "fuck," I finally understand what the situation is. This slang word for a soldier is not normally found in our boss's dictionary, and it betrays that he himself is extremely excited. Untersturmführer Weiser confirms the receipt of the order, gives the appropriate commands to the tanks of our platoon. Calls a contact to receive. "Driver, go ahead" is his order to me. A few moments later I am enveloped in smoke. I have to slow down so I don't run into anything. Like stills from a silent movie in front of my peephole: debris - flames - ghostly figures in Russian helmets. A hail of shells is raining down on us. Suddenly, somewhere a strong blow. Course correction? How can you find a command post in this chaos? The contact has no way to navigate. Especially since he's in the tower.

Weiser often communicates by radio, asks for increased fire support, orders the rest of the tanks to linger, reports hits, reports that he continues on his way alone in the lead vehicle. Afterbirth

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She received a radio message: "On the tank - non-dangerous hits from anti-tank rifles and guns - orientation is impossible - I continue to move on anyway." In wild tension, we do not notice that we are no longer receiving orders or confirmations. And when did the antenna expire? No more communication - no orders - failure of a hopeless operation?

All this took less time than it takes to read these lines. The onboard radio is unharmed. We are still following in the direction of the enemy and surrounded by him. Did a German armored personnel carrier just flash by? German steel helmet? No, mistake! Only Russians! Suddenly an alarming order: "T-34! The turret — to the 2 o'clock position — armor-piercing — fire." "The turret jammed," the gunner reports. Now the situation is getting really serious. "Driver, point the car, turn right" - the order comes. I turn to the right, I go in third gear, I should have switched, I know that there is no time. I turn the car around. Suddenly - a roar, then silence! Look at the tachometer. I understand: the motor is worth it. Stalled or hit? Start! The motor worked. I ask: "What should I do?" Then the radio operator rips off the headphones from my head and yells: "The gunner is killed - the on-board radio installation is out of order."

I yell: "Ask the loader what I should do." Answer: "The commander is also killed" - "Driver, now it's all up to you," flashes through my head. A few seconds later I see Russians running towards our tank, I touch the car. Here I notice no more than a hundred meters of our enemy - T-34. Is the gun moving? I jerk the tank around 90 degrees, then there is a roar. I think I beat him by a split second. Instinctively, I hid the car behind the wreckage of a burnt tank. Another 90 degree turn. My intuition tells me that this is the right course. The messenger jumped out of the car and surrendered to the Russians, the loader was wounded. The danger has not yet passed. I'm leaving the zone behind

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and I see the commander of a half-company, Unterscharführer Harald Stein, on his tank. My viewing device is hit damaged. I stick my head out of the hatch and Stein shows me the direction with his hand. Hauptsturmführer Thimann orders me to return to my men, while Stein covers me with fire.

At the anti-tank ditch, the radio operator with the wounded loader disembark and go to the dressing station. I am alone. Later, someone counted the hits on my tank. The viewing device of my tank is changing hands. 17 hits from infantry shelling, 3 from tank guns were counted by my comrades.

As the Battle of Kursk developed, the 4th German Panzer Army began to be threatened by the Soviet Panzer Corps, which could be joined by two more tank corps, which were part of the 1st Panzer Army. The SS Panzer Corps, which was on the flank of Army II, could find itself in a critical situation from day to day. The Totenkopf Division was to take positions to the left of the Leibstandarte in order to reinforce the point of attack of the SS Panzer Corps. The 167th Infantry Division was deployed on the southern edge of the western flank. On that day, the Sovinformburo reports reported that on July 7, 1943 alone, Soviet troops destroyed 70 Tigers and 450 other German tanks. Obviously, this information had nothing to do with reality. As a result, it turned out that by the end of the Battle of Kursk, units of the Red Army had destroyed more "tigers" than there were on the entire Eastern Front put together.

On June 8, 1943, at 7:10 a.m., units of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, advancing from the southwest, took Bolshiye Mayachki. At 8 o'clock the tank groups of the "Leibstandarte" and "Reich" divisions continued to advance in a north-westerly direction. To the south-east of the village of Vesely, the Leibstandarte tank group collided with 80 Soviet tanks. The battle lasted

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up to 10 hours 30 minutes. After that, the Soviet tanks turned south and attacked the 1st battalion of the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment, which was located at that moment in the village of Yablochki. After regrouping, the Leibstandarte tank group continued to advance further to the west. At 12 o'clock, a tank battle began again near Vesely.

The description of the battle in Vesely and the village of Rylsky, in which the "tigers" of the Leibstandarte took part, was preserved in the same presentation of Kling for a high reward: "The attack of the 2nd battalion of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment was stopped and fortified - enemy anti-tank lines, consisting of anti-tank guns and tanks dug into the ground. Hauptsturmführer Kling with four tanks attacked the line flag, destroying several enemy tanks. As the offensive continued, Kling, who was at the head of a mixed panzer group, resolutely moved forward, reaching the rear of the enemy's defensive lines. This forced the enemy, who that day lost forty-two T-34s on this sector of the front, to flee in panic.

In this battle, Navigator Warmbrunn was able to knock out three Soviet tanks. Teterevino became the starting point for the attack of the tank group, in which there were several "tigers" at the beginning of the day. Early in the morning, the Panzergrenadier Regiment "Germany" of the SS division "Reich" took up their positions there. The line of battles at that time stretched east from Teterevino. The border between the fighting sides was the railway line that ran through Prokhorovka. On that day, the crew of Franz Staudegger could not take part in the battles, as the tank broke down again. As a result, on July 8, Staudegger and his people remained in Teterevino. As Staudegger himself described the events, a few hours later a large group of Soviet tanks began to approach the village. It contained at least fifty combat vehicles. "Since I didn't go with the company, then I'm going to go hunting for them," he threw at that moment

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Staudegger to Rolf Shamp, whose tank was also out of order. Without a moment's hesitation, Staudegger did his best to get his "tiger" moving again. His tank immediately rushed towards the T-34. At that time, the Staudegger crew consisted of navigator Herbert Stellmacher (driver), Panzerschütze Gerhardt Waltersdorf (radio operator), Heinz Büchner (gunner), Walter Henke (loader).

On the way, the grenadiers informed Staudegger that five Soviet tanks had already broken into the German positions. Almost immediately after that, he saw how the infantrymen were able to knock out two T-34s. Suddenly, two Soviet tanks appeared at the railway embankment. Two direct hits and they're both destroyed. Staudegger continued to move forward along the positions on which

there were no more German soldiers. He was the first to notice the approaching Soviet tanks. Five of them appeared from the forest near the railroad. Heinz Buechner accurately aimed at the first of them and sent a shell into his tower. Explosion, T-34 is on fire. Noticing the "tiger", the rest of the Soviet tanks opened fire on it. The Staudegger tank fired shell after shell. As a result, in this incredibly difficult skirmish, all five T-34s were hit.

When the rest of the Soviet tanks appeared from the forest, Staudegger was already ready to fire on them. In this situation, the most difficult job was for the loader Walter Henke, who had to reload the gun as quickly as possible. Any second of delay could result in the death of the entire crew. At the same time, the driver-mechanic Herbert Stellmacher tried to keep the "tiger" in motion all the time. He skillfully changed positions so that the armada of Soviet tanks was unable to open fire on him from all guns at once. T-34, it was decided to destroy one at a time. The battle of one "tiger" against fifty (with time their number decreased) Soviet tanks lasted almost two hours! By this time, the Staudegger crew was able to knock out seventeen T-34s.

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It was not worth believing that they did not fall into the "tiger". But the Soviet shells did not inflict significant damage on him. As a result, the commander of the Soviet tank group realized that breaking through the front line in this area had cost him too much, and gave the order to retreat. However, Staudegger did not want this panzer group to strike elsewhere. He did not plan to withdraw to safe positions. He wanted more. He moved forward to find the Soviet tanks himself! It was a very bold decision, and Staudegger's chances of success were negligible. But the biggest possibility was that he could fall into an ambush organized by Soviet tanks. But at that moment, Staudegger did not care much.

The huge "tiger" slowly rolled forward. The crew commander's attention was focused on the landscape. The armor-piercing projectile was already loaded, and Buchner was looking for a target through a telescopic sight. She appeared as suddenly as the "tiger" itself. Soviet tanks were regrouping in the ravine. The engine of the "tiger" growled, the tank rushed forward, stopped abruptly, and the projectile was sent right on target. The Tiger fired shell after shell into the cluster of Soviet tanks. As a result, five more T-34s were shot down. When the armor-piercing shells ran out, Staudegger gave the order to fire incendiary shells. As the gunner noted, several more Soviet tanks were hit.

It seemed that the T-34 crews were taken aback. "Tiger" seemed to them \_ "indomitable." The remaining intact Soviet tanks preferred to hastily escape. When Staudegger's tank returned, the grenadiers of the Germania regiment greeted him with almost a standing ovation. They knew to whom they owed

with your salvation.

The bold actions of the twenty-year-old native of Carinthia led to significant tactical success. He managed to prevent the breakthrough of Soviet tanks in a southwestern direction, which was intended to reduce

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to improve the supply routes for ammunition for the Red Army units. As it turned out, during this battle Staudegger destroyed twenty-two T-34s. A patrol sent later by the commander of the 2nd company of the Panzergrenadier Regiment "Germany" confirmed this information. The next day, the commander of the Leibstandarte tank regiment presented him for the award of the Knight's Cross. A day later, on July 10, SS scribe-Untersturmführer Franz was ready to present a version of Staudegger, who was awarded the Knight's Lension for the award. REM

The awarding of Staudegger with the Knight's Cross came as a surprise to most of the tankers of the 13th heavy company of the Leibstandarte, since on July 8 they fought in another place and did not know that their colleague had to fight alone. Franz Staudegger was not only the first

an Austrian who ended up in the ranks of the Leibstandarte, but also the first employee of a company of heavy tanks, who was presented for the award of the Knight's Cross.

Almost immediately after that, almost all German newspapers wrote about the feat of Staudegger, here are excerpts from some newspaper articles.

Twenty-two T-34s destroyed by one "Tiger"

From the Headquarters of the Fuhrer they report. On June 10, 1943, the Fuhrer awarded the Knight's Cross to SS-Unterscharführer Franz Staudegger, tank commander of the Leibstandarte Panzer Regiment. Staudegger, who for technical reasons could not take part in the attack together  
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with his regiment, received the news that a column of 50-60 T-34s was advancing behind our forces. Despite the multiple superiority of the enemy forces, Staudegger, on his own initiative, decided to attack the enemy tank column. In a battle that lasted two hours, he, competently using the positions occupied by his tank, was able to destroy seventeen T-34s. When the enemy tanks retreated, Staudegger followed them. Without any fire support, he was able to knock out five more T-34s. The rest of the Bolsheviks fled in panic. Thanks to his courage, Staudegger not only prevented the enemy from breaking through to our rear, but caused significant damage to his tank units.

"Black Corps". SS Unterscharführer Staudegger

An SS propaganda company reports a powerful Soviet tank unit.

Franz Staudegger, a tall Carinthian with a hoarse voice, climbs the tower of his Tiger. Tank with a roar rushes towards the front. On the way, the grenadier informs him that five Soviet tanks have already broken through the line of defense. He already sees two of them, which are shot down by soldiers at close range. In a matter of seconds, the gun of his tank turns towards the remaining three T-34s. Staudegger throws his tank forward.

The next two T-34s appear at the railway embankment. Within a minute they turn into smoking heaps of iron. Five more enemy tanks appear from the forest. During the fierce battle they were also destroyed. Continuing to move forward, Staudegger notices part of the tank, which has taken cover in a ravine. The gunner, fast as lightning, using the advantageous position of the tank, sends a projectile into it. After twenty-two tanks were destroyed, armor-piercing shells ran out. The remaining enemy tanks are fired with incendiary shells, which also inflict mass on them.

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damage. When Staudegger turns back, he does not ignore the remaining enemy. But by this point, the ammunition is almost over, and the fuel is almost at zero. He sees the jubilant grenadiers running towards him with joy. The regiment commander, on his own initiative, hangs an Iron Cross, first class, on the chest of a brave tankman. For his bravery and loyalty to his military duty, the Fuhrer awarded him the Knight's Cross.

SS war correspondent Vondratsch!.

July 9, 1943 was a day of rest for the crews of the Tigers. They arrived in Teterevino. During this day, it was necessary to repair all the tanks damaged in the battles. When repairs were completed, the crews took advantage of short rest hours to recover from the recent fighting. Wittmann received the "Tiger" 1324 in his platoon, commanded by Champ. It should be noted that during the Battle of Kursk, a platoon of medium tanks RNU was not actually used in battles. Mostly its composition carried out guard duty or patrolled operational rear areas on tanks.

On July 10, 1943, the 13th company of heavy tanks, together with a battalion of assault guns, was introduced into the Strike Group of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment (Kraas). They were given the task of advancing up to Prokhorovka after the end of the shelling of Soviet positions. Fire support for this attack was to be carried out by the entire Leibstandarte artillery regiment and the 55th rocket artillery regiment. The Leibstandarte tank regiment itself was to advance parallel to the strike group of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment along the Teterevino-Luchki road. Since the presence of minefields was assumed on the path of the advancing German units, the

There are a lot of inaccuracies in this material.

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In the SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, a sapper company was also introduced, which was supposed to prepare passages east of Luchkov.

At dawn, the German rocket launchers and heavy artillery opened fire on the Soviet positions. Prior to this, the "tigers" went to their original positions, which were located north of Teterevino. At three o'clock in the morning they were there. It is worth adding that the tactical situation was complicated by the fact that at night the units of the "Dead Head" division could not take the dominant height 226.6 near the bend of the Psel River. And this was one of the important conditions for the upcoming offensive. Parts of the "Leibstandarte" began their offensive in the direction of Prokhorovka at 10:45. At the same time, part of the artillery battalions shifted their fire to the hills to the Psel River, where parts of the "Dead Head" division fought fierce battles. By 13 o'clock the advancing German units reached the border of the forest near the village of Sloevoye. They moved up to Hill 214.6. Here a bloody battle ensued. In this situation, the Germans were rescued only by the support of the "tigers" and assault guns. The offensive developed, and tactical success, it would seem, was inevitable. "Gigry" shots of incendiary shells destroyed several fortified positions of the Soviet units. As we approached the defensive line, several camouflaged anti-tank guns were identified and destroyed. During this battle, the commander of the "Tiger" 1311, SS Ober-Sturmführer Schutz, was seriously wounded. Gunner Unterscharführer Wendt took command.

With the support of the reconnaissance and 1st tank battalions of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, at 1630 hours the Soviet positions were finally broken through and the height was taken. Sturmman Warmbrunn, a gunner in the company commander's tank, in this battle was able to hit nine T-34s and destroy three 76.2-mm anti-tank guns with accurate shots.

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After the battle, about twenty members of the 13th Heavy Tank Company decided to celebrate when Staudegger was awarded the Knight's Cross. At noon, SS-Oberführer Wisch delivered a congratulatory speech. The battle that did not fade for an hour was the reason that the celebration was improvised and fleeting. Even from neighboring divisions came to congratulate Staudegger. He himself could not believe his luck. Following the message of awarding him the Knight's Cross, another, no less exciting news came. Adolf Hitler personally wanted to meet with him at his Headquarters. As a result, Staudegger, dressed in a field uniform of a tanker, told the Fuhrer about the details of the battle that had become almost legendary. After that, he went on vacation, which he spent in his hometown of Bleiburg. There he was honored by the local population. At a solemn city meeting, Staudegger was presented with documents for a gift - a brand new Volkswagen car. In those days, this tanker had to make speeches more than once, but he did not forget about his native company of heavy tanks. From Germany, he sent several letters to the front in his unit.

On July 11, 1943, German tank units launched an offensive against Prokhorovka. The offensive began with the fact that the "Leibstandarte" attacked the Soviet positions from two flanks. But the Red Army was not going to be inactive. Almost immediately, the T-34s attacked the positions of the 2nd



SS Panzergrenadier Regiment near the village of Yamki. But the SS continued their offensive. To the south-west of the settlement of Oktyabrsky, his subdivisions came across an anti-tank line that had not been seen before. The 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, supported by a company of Tigers, launched an assault on Hill 252.2. Despite the fact that a heavy battle ensued here, the anti-tank line was broken through, and the height was taken.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Becker and his 1st Battalion, together with the 1st SS Sapper Company, were able to capture Part

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Soviet trenches. Having successfully fought a battle in them, they were able to ensure the advancement of the "tigers" forward. Some time later, Peiper and his battle group attacked the high ground from the south. At 13:10, after many hours of battle, in which one side or the other took over, the German tanks and panzergrenadier units were finally able to gain a foothold at a height of 252.2. From that moment on, Peiper's battle group began to approach the Oktyabrsky settlement. At 13:30, the Soviet units tried to carry out a counterattack and attacked (already German positions) near Hill 252.2. The German grenadiers still managed to repulse the Soviet tank attack in a difficult battle.

In those days, the documents recorded battles in which a company of heavy tanks took part: "after the detachment left Teterevino and advanced one and a half kilometers west of Prokhorovka, four tanks from the company under the command of Kling successfully took participation in repelling the advance of Soviet tanks on our positions. Kling and the three combat-ready "tigers" under his command on July 10-11, 1943, themselves went towards the enemy tanks. During these battles, twenty-four T-34s were destroyed. Thanks to the personal efforts of Kling, who destroyed twenty-eight anti-tank guns, our advance to a height of one and a half kilometers from Prokhorovka became possible. During these battles, Kling was wounded.

After Kling was wounded, Michael Wittmann took over command of the company. Due to the strong concentration of anti-tank artillery at height 252.4, which was located northwest of the Psel River, it was decided to postpone the frontal attack on Prokhorovka until July 12, 1943. On this day, the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment and the Life Standard Panzer Group planned to take Prokhorovka after the units of the Totenkopf Division had eliminated the threat

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zu from the flank. After that, the two SS divisions were to unite.

July 12, 1943 was the day of the largest tank battle in history. On that day, two Soviet tank corps clashed with the II SS Panzer Corps, which consisted of three tank divisions. Early in the morning, the Leibstandarte tank group, moving along the Prokhorovka-Petrovka line, was attacked by fifty Soviet tanks. At the same time, the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment was attacked by units of the Red Army near the village of Yamka. During this battle, the 3rd company of the Leibstandarte anti-tank battalion, commanded by SS Oberscharführer Kurt Zametrait, destroyed twenty-four Soviet tanks. For this, the company commander was presented to the Knight's Cross. At 09:20, after powerful artillery support, about one hundred and fifty Soviet tanks with armored infantry attacked the German units near Prokhorovka at high speed. Almost immediately, the positions of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment were broken through. In the first minutes of the battle near the village of Oktyabrsky, four German R21U tanks were destroyed, which were under the command of SS Obersturmführer von Ribbentrop. The surviving three tanks of von Ribbentrop moved towards the Soviet tank wave. In close combat, they managed to destroy fourteen T-34s. Moving further, the Soviet tanks ran into the fortified positions of the 2nd battalion of the SS tank regiment. The tank battalion was commanded by Sturmbannführer Martin

Gross. Nearby were the "tigers" commanded by Michael Wittmann. During this Soviet tank attack, all German armored vehicles were completely destroyed.

SS Rottenführer Johannes Breuer, the driver of one of the armored personnel carriers, described this incident as follows: "After crossing the anti-tank ditches, we moved forward

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ed during the night of 11 July 1943. Only at dawn on July 11, we were able to survey all the surroundings. I saw a mass of troops and tanks that were around us from all sides. It could be assumed that something great was being planned. But in any case, we had no idea what lay ahead of us. I participated in the Eastern Campaign from the very beginning. I went from Zhytomyr to Rostov, fought in winter battles, but I have never seen such hell. Everything happened surprisingly so quickly that no one could figure out what had to be done.

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Breuer was wounded in the eye by a shell fragment. SS-Unter-Scharführer Erhard Knöfel, who served in the same company as Breuer, added: "/// July 1943, our detachment in armored personnel carriers was placed a little behind between the tanks of our division and assault guns. Our positions resembled a chessboard. The crew of our half-track armored personnel carrier planned to sleep for several hours. But at dawn our tanks moved forward. We still thought that we would get at least half an hour of sleep, but it turned out not to be so. "Red" tanks ascended the height at the same time as ours. As a result, our tanks with armored infantry and Soviet vehicles mixed up with each other. The T-34s, which had broken through, simply began to crush us. In the confusion of the battle, we tried to take cover in any hollow. SS Untersturmführer Wolf was able to knock out one Soviet tank. All day he fought shoulder to shoulder with us. In the meantime, our self-propelled guns began to hit the Soviet tanks with direct fire. The Soviet offensive began to stop. It seemed that hell had burst out — sheaves of flame flickered around, and torn off tank towers flew across the sky. We suffered huge losses. I myself remained in the car of the company commander. As a nurse, I had enough work that day. When, on my knees, I was bandaging one of the wounded, a fragment hit me in the thigh. I took off my harness and tied my thigh. I found some hole and got ready

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climb into it. But what did I see there? Two pairs of terrified eyes staring at me. They were the remnants of the enemy tank crew, as unarmed as I myself."

SS Untersturmführer Erhard Gurs, commander of one of the artillery crews, recalled: "We were attacked in the morning. They were around us, among us and behind us. We fought almost man against man. We jumped out of all holes, grabbed charges in our armored personnel carriers! and stuffed them into enemy tanks. Then we darted to the side. It was pure hell! At 9 o'clock in the morning we again controlled the territory. Fortunately, our tanks helped us a lot. In this battle, my company destroyed fifteen Soviet tanks.

Even a single person could play a role in this pandemonium of tanks. In the midst of the horror of this battle, Peiper's adjutant SS-Untersturmführer Werner Wolf formed a small team and set out to destroy the Soviet tanks. Wolf was known not only as a daredevil, but also as a great connoisseur of close combat, in which he showed miracles of courage. On that day, he alone managed to destroy the T-34. For his actions that day, he was awarded the Knight's Cross. Jochen Peiper also managed to destroy one Soviet tank. At this time, the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Panzer Regiment of the Leibstandarte, commanded by SS Sturmbannführer Martin Gross, was drawn into a bloody battle. The battalion met the morning approximately 2.5 kilometers from Prokhorovka, near height 252.2.

The regimental war diary recorded: "At about 08:15, 150 enemy tanks, dominated by T-34s, broke through the line held by the infantry and stormed our tank positions on a narrow sector of the front. using

1 Means special shaped charges, which were intended to fight against tanks as hand weapons.

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for this high speed and all kinds of weapons. SS Sturmbannführer Martin Gross hastily organized the defense. She turned out to be so skillful that his unit, attacked from three sides, was able to repulse the attack of the enemy. He himself fought shoulder to shoulder with his soldiers, setting an example for the battalion with his behavior.

During many hours of battle, Sturmbannführer Gross and his battalion managed to repulse the attack and destroy one hundred and seven Soviet tanks. The remaining T-34s were destroyed already during the retreat by anti-tank artillery fire and "tigers". Michael Wittmann, who commanded the remnants of the 13th Leibstandarte heavy tank company, personally destroyed several Soviet vehicles during their pursuit. He once again demonstrated that personal skills and experience were indispensable in tank battles. This was evidenced at least by the number of  
only on that day by his crew of Soviet tanks.

A reporter from the SS propaganda company then wrote: "He did not shy away from clashes. A great confrontation of tanks began. One iron fights another, which propelled Wittmann to the pinnacle of glory. When this great battle began near Belgorod, he alone was able to destroy eight tanks. Wittmann showed what he was capable of in an unpredictable situation on the outskirts of the village. He smashed enemy artillery batteries and destroyed several camouflaged anti-tank nests. At first he acted cautiously, but then desperately, which brought him success. Instinctive instinct and luck allowed him to survive these five dark, blazing days of battle. When, on the fifth day of the battle, Michael Wittmann washed his face, blackened from soot and powder gases, with water, he knew that he left behind thirty destroyed T-34s and twenty-eight destroyed Soviet anti-tank guns."

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Regarding July 12, 1943, there is very little information left about the actions of other "tigers". It is known that several accurate shots on the T-34 were fired by gunner Warmbrunn. Speaking of Wittmann's tactical success, it was predetermined by the precision of his actions and rare self-control. For the first time, he showed the whole world that the tactics he proposed, combined with the onslaught and aggressiveness of the maneuver, could lead to unprecedented success. But at the same time, he demanded that his crew give all the best to 100% and even more. Wittmann never shouted and did not like the barracks drill, but he did his best to fight negligence during the fighting. He demanded from all crew members to show the highest skill in handling a tank, a gun, a machine gun. He didn't have to repeat his orders. On that day, SS-Untersturmführer Helmut Greser was the gunner in Wittmann's crew. Glaube was the loader, Fuss was the driver, Lieber was the gunner-radio operator.

After the end of the battle, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Commander of Army Group South, personally expressed gratitude and gratitude to the units of the II SS Panzer Corps.

On July 13, 1943, navigator Champ commissioned the restored Tiger by Michael Wittmann. At 10 o'clock in the morning the offensive of the "tigers" was planned in the direction of the hills lying to the north-west of Oktyabrsky. At the same time, the Leibstandarte reconnaissance battalion was to head towards the village of Mikhailovka. Based on the results of the reconnaissance, it was supposed to close the positions of the SS division "Leibstandarte" and "Dead Head". In the first half hour of the offensive, the German tanks were able to move forward significantly. But on the slopes of the hills, they stumbled upon a powerful anti-tank line created by the united front. Once again, the Soviet anti-tank defense was reinforced by T-34s dug into the ground. Entering

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The reconnaissance battalion of the Leibstandarte, which was heading to Mikhailovka, accepted the battle, but, being unable to resist the Soviet artillery, retreated in the direction of Hill 241.6, which was located north of the Psel River. This day was marked by the most powerful Soviet artillery fire in all sectors of the battle. It seemed to start to subside in the afternoon, but to intensify again as darkness fell. There was virtually no close combat anywhere, and therefore the night passed "relatively calmly."

On the same day, the commanders of Army Groups South and Center, von Manstein and von Kluge, met with Hitler. At this meeting, the question was discussed: to continue or curtail the operation "Citadel". Von Manstein insisted that under certain conditions it was necessary to continue the offensive. The fact is that in the sector of its offensive, the German troops could still succeed. By that moment, near Belgorod, the Red Army had virtually no reserves left, and therefore the Field Marshal General planned to inflict a major defeat on the Soviet command. Von Kluge, on the contrary, insisted on stopping the offensive. It was his arguments that seemed to Hitler more convincing.

The events of that day at the front were recorded in the diary of SS navigator Warmbrunn: "/July 3, 1943. Wittmann and I make our way through the collective farm. We were greeted in one gulp by "Stalin's organs"! It seems that the Red Army knew where we would move. We were overwhelmed by the rubble of the wall. Wittmann said dryly, "Now it's better to pray." I allowed myself to joke: "To whom." I don't think that anyone else reacted in such a critical situation in the way that Wittmann did. He laughed. Later, he liked to recall this situation at every opportunity.

So the Germans called "Katyusha".

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As practice has shown, in those hot July days of 1943, the 13th company of heavy tanks proved to be excellent in combat operations. Wittmann himself wrote: "By that time, our company was able to achieve excellent results. Its forces destroyed one hundred and fifty-one tanks, eighty-seven heavy anti-tank guns, and three artillery batteries. At the same time, for all five days of the offensive operation and defensive battles in the Belgorod region in July 1943, the company did not suffer almost a single irretrievable loss.

To this fantastic number of destroyed Soviet tanks and guns, one could add an innumerable number of bunkers, fire and machine-gun nests, and dugouts. This success was doubly impressive, since not a single "tiger" was destroyed. Some of them were out of action for a while, but a day or two later they went into battle again. The 13th heavy tank company became a deadly weapon in the hands of the Leibstandarte command. The fame of her almost instantly spread throughout the SS division.

In this regard, Wittmann became known throughout the SS Panzer Corps. He was the leader in the number of destroyed Soviet equipment. He was followed by SS Unterscharführer Staudegger, who accounted for twenty-four destroyed tanks, two of which were destroyed in close combat. SS Unterscharführers Brandt, Höld and Lötszycz who followed them were jokingly nicknamed Walthasar Woll.

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"tank generals". However, none of them concealed the fact that the success of the 13th tank company of the Leibstandarte also largely depended on the lightning-fast actions of the gunners, who were mostly twenty years old. These were SS navigators Warmbrunn, Woll, Schamp, Helmut Grezer. The young tank crews proved themselves excellently during one of the most fierce and bloody battles in the history of mankind. By July 14, 1943, the 13th company of heavy tanks had five operational Tigers at its disposal. In total, the Leibstandarte at that time had thirty-two R21U tanks and about a dozen light tanks that could enter the battle. The Panzer Group of the elite SS division was located at

height 247.6 northeast of the village of Komsomolets. After the units of the SS division "Reich" captured Pravorott, the tank group of the "Leibstandarte" moved in the direction of the village of Yamki. During this operation, the Leibstandarte tanks were placed under operational command by representatives of the Reich division. According to German intelligence, on the segment of the front between Yamki and Mikhailovka, a Soviet strike group was concentrated, which included more than a hundred tanks. It was clear that a crushing blow was to be dealt to the SS divisions. As a result, the command of the II SS Panzer Corps decided to postpone the tank attack on Yamki. This offensive was complicated by the fact that torrential rains began, which turned the field roads into solid slurry. As for the remnants of the 13th company of the "Tigers", on that day the taciturn SS navigator Champ wrote in his diary: "Bombs, Stalin's organs and artillery." Soviet reconnaissance units began to probe the German defense line as early as July 15, 1943. Bombers were lifted into the air. By this moment, according to the headquarters reports, five hundred and one Soviet

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tank. By this time, there were already eight Tigers in service. At that time, the 13th heavy tank company of the "Leibstandarte" guarded the approaches to the railway, where no battles were fought.

On July 16, 1943, hundreds of Soviet guns and mortars rained down on the German positions. But the general offensive never began. There were small fights on the front line. By July 17, the positions of the Leibstandarte stretched along the line Teterevino - the eastern part of Prokhorovka - Vasilievka. By this time, Wittmann already had ten serviceable "tigers" at his disposal.

On July 17, 1943, after dark, the German units located west of Belgorod began to retreat. For the SS division Leibstandarte, this meant the end of Operation Citadel. Despite the obvious success of this SS division in destroying the unprecedented Soviet anti-tank system, one could speak of a tactical defeat of the German troops. By the end of the operation, the division's losses amounted to 474 people killed (21 officers), 2202 people wounded (65 officers), 77 people missing (1 officer). In the 13th company of heavy tanks itself, only five people died in those battles.

If we characterize Operation Citadel as a whole and the role assigned to the Tigers in it, then it is necessary to note several important points. In Soviet historiography (and, with its light hand, in some Western historical works), a fundamentally wrong idea prevailed about the number of heavy Tiger tanks that took part in the Battle of Kursk. So, for example, in his works, the English historian Alan Bullock speaks of seventeen tank divisions, which included separate tank regiments from the "tigers". In total, this was to be about two thousand heavy tanks. In the conditions of existence at that moment in the composition of the tank divisions only heavy

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this number of tank companies would be enough for 118 tank divisions! Naturally, the figure is fantastic. In fact, only 146 took part in Operation Citadel! "tigers". But even this number of heavy tanks was quite enough for them to prove themselves from the very best side. This is evidenced at least by the results of the battle. The crew of Michael Wittmann had at least 30 tanks, 28 powerful anti-tank guns and 2 Soviet artillery batteries. During the battle, the crew of the company commander of SS Hauptsturmführer Kling knocked out 18 tanks and 27 anti-tank guns. At the same time, every day Soviet propaganda reported on the many destroyed "tigers", but this was not true. In particular, it was said about 2818 destroyed German tanks, 700 of which were Tigers. We emphasize once again that this number exceeded the number of "tigers" that were available at that moment on the entire Eastern Front.

.1 Some sources speak of 148 "tigers", which, however, does not change the picture as a whole.

#### Chapter 4

On July 8, 1943, the II SS Panzer Corps was withdrawn from the 4th German Panzer Army. On that day, Rolf Champ made a laconic entry in his diary: "Evening March. Overcame 60 kilometers. I spent the night right in the field." On July 19, 1943, the Tigers arrived in Belgorod, where they were loaded onto trains. They were to be transported north of Stalino. Two days later, the 13th heavy company of the Leibstandarte, which then numbered twelve Tigers, arrived in Slavyansk. It was there that Michael Wittmann, who served as commander of a tank company, began to present the most distinguished colleagues for awards. Panzerschütze Heinz Büchner, awarded both Iron Crosses for his accurate shooting on July 8, 1943 (destruction of 22 tanks by the Staudegger crew). By the end of the Battle of Kursk, Büchner was one of the most successful gunners in all of the German tank forces. On his personal account there were fifty-one wrecked Soviet tanks. The remaining members of the Staudegger crew were presented to the Iron Cross Second Class. The driver of the Wittmann tank, Siegfried Fuss, was also presented for this award.

On July 24, 1943, an order was unexpectedly received to launch a tank attack in the area of the Mius River, but

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July 19, 1943. Transportation of "tigers" to Belgorod

this order was canceled almost immediately. On July 25, the division "Leibstandarte" arrived in the city of Artemovsk. When the division had already gathered in the trains to leave the city, at 23:35 another order was received: "Stop the movement. Get ready for unloading. As often happens in such situations, the most incredible rumors spread throughout the division. They were reinforced by the fact that all the tanks of the 13th heavy company of the Leibstandarte (without crews) were transferred to the disposal of the SS divisions "Reich" and "Totenkopf". Four "tigers" were at the disposal of SS Oberscharführer Konrad Schweigen (Division "Reich"). He wrote in his diary a day later: "Now we have eighteen RIG tanks. As a result, there are more vehicles than actually formed crews. My attention was drawn to a tank with a lot of black ribbon rings on the barrel of a 88-millimeter gun. Every tank knocked out by the crew was noted there. I suspect that this is the machine of Michael Wittmann.

At 00 hours on July 27, 1943, all units of the Leibstandarte received a special order. They had to transfer all the tanks they had to other divisions. July 29, 1943 at 7 o'clock in the morning all the tankers were loaded

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in the village of Golovka on trucks. They were delivered to the railway transport. Now the tension was gone - it was clear to everyone that after heavy fighting they were going to rest.

The Arrow of Lightning train (an analogue of the military express train) was the fastest way to travel by rail. Walter Lau recalled: "We were moving towards Germany at maximum speed. There were no stops. All the trains we encountered were transferred to other tracks. This was doubly unusual, since usually the echelons traveling from the front constantly stopped so that those who needed to go to the Reich could get off. Our path was not short. At some point it became clear that we were moving in the direction of Munich-Nuremberg, but no one knew where our trip was supposed to end. As we passed Munich and began to approach Rosenheim, rumors spread that Innsbruck was our destination. In Innsbruck, we unloaded late in the evening. Someone settled down in the open air, and someone in nearby houses. Finally, we could sleep in the halls, and not on enemy territory, where we had to

requisition huts. Our echelon was billeted in a building that looked very much like a school. For a while we could enjoy walking and watching movies.”

After several days in Innsbruck, the 13th company of Leibstandarte heavy tanks was sent to Brenner (South Tyrol). On the way, the tankers could admire the wonderful Tyrolean views. And ahead of them was a joyful welcome. As soon as the border of South Tyrol was crossed, which, after the First World War, went to Italy and was a disputed territory, the local German population threw flowers and fruits at cars with employees of the Leibstandarte. Many on the move tried to pass bottles of wine to the tankers. The jubilation in South Tyrol knew no bounds, and

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July 29, 1943. The Leibstandarte heads to Italy

the entire path of movement of the SS tankers turned into one continuous triumphal procession. The inhabitants of South Tyrol, who were predominantly Germanic-speaking, did not hide their delight that they would no longer have to be under Italian rule. However, the appearance of the "Leibstandarte" was interpreted somewhat incorrectly, it was not at all the Anschluss of South Tyrol. The path of the tankers lay further south. Trucks and cars with them went through Bolzano, Trento, Verona, Mantua, Parma, until they eventually stopped in Reggio nel Emilia. The 13th company of heavy tanks was stationed north of the city of Reggio nel Emilia on August 8, 1943. Vineyards stretched around the tankers, seemingly endless. The weather was hot, and it was decided to set up a tent city. After the horrors of the Eastern Front, this place seemed like a real paradise to the tankers. Some of the employees of the 13th heavy tank company arrived in Italy with some delay.

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niem. One of them was Rolf Champ, who in a typical manner described his return journey from the Eastern Front in his diary: "July 29 – 7 o'clock, a truck leaves Golovka. Shower. industrial landscapes. Lime pyramids. 30.07 — we hand over the weapon, we are engaged in repairs. 1.08 - at 3 o'clock in the morning we set off. August 2 — Alexandria, Fastov, Kasatin, Berdichev. 3.08 - Lviv. 04.08 — Krakow, Kattowitz, at 12:25 we cross the border of the Reich. August 5 - Hirschberg, Görlitz, Dresden. August 6 — Chemnitz, Zeschendorf, Zwickau. 7.08 - Regensburg, Landshut, Rosenheim, Innsbruck.

By that time, for many men, a tank company had become a second home. In the circle of their comrades, they felt safe, happy in their own way. Those who were wounded during the Battle of Kursk began to return to the 13th company. Good weather and a warm welcome awaited them.

SS Panzerschütze Alfred Lünzer, who in the first days of July 1943 was discharged from the Kremenchug

On vacation in Italy. Left to right: Heinz Buchner, Bobby Warmbrunn, Gerhardt Waltersdorf

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hospital, described his "odyssey" as follows: "I arrived in Kharkov by train. Operation Citadel had already begun, and therefore I was assigned to a completely different unit. I ran away from there. I came to Red Square in Kharkov and jumped on the very first truck that bore the emblem of the Leibstandarte. So I was able to get out of the city. Then I moved to an armored personnel carrier, then to another truck, then to a Kübelwagen-type vehicle, and only after that I ended up in my division. There was a party going on in broad daylight. What's happened? It turns out that our company celebrated the award of the Knight's Cross to Franz Staudegger. This happened on July 10, 1943. Then we went via Innsbruck to Italy. At the beginning of August we set up camp among the endless vineyards. There were no more tanks and we were sleeping

in tents". In Italy, the employees of the Leibstandarte, probably for the first time in many months, found time to write letters home. In response, they received letters from Germany itself. But this time was not only a period of rest, but also a time of great organizational change. The 1st SS Panzer Corps was formed on the basis of the Leibstandarte division. On July 19, 1943, it was decided that a tank battalion would be created in its composition, manned only by "tigers". He received the number 101. The very system of numbering parts has also changed. In the case of a heavy tank battalion, this was the number of the corps + the number of the unit itself. Number 101 itself (1st Tank Corps, 1st Tank Battalion) indicated the exceptional position of this unit. If the Leibstandarte was considered military unit No. 1 in Germany, then the heavy tank battalion was unit No. 1 in the Leibstandarte. In a sense, this tank unit was the most elite in the entire Reich, Panzer Unit No. 1. The 101st Leibstandarte Panzer Battalion itself was to consist of a battalion headquarters, a headquarters company, three heavy tank companies and a maintenance company.

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Kling and Hauptscharführer Habermann

The 13th heavy tank company proper, commanded by Michael Wittmann by the end of the Battle of Kursk, was to become the 3rd tank company of the newly formed 101st heavy tank battalion. The first officers began to appear in the battalion already in July 1943. Very many of them came from the assault gun battalion of the Leibstandarte. Most of them ended up in Italy in August 1943, in Reggione Emilia, where the 13th heavy tank company, already formed at that time, was located.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling, who had been wounded during the Battle of Kursk, was reunited with his company already in Italy. On August 25, 1943, he was awarded the gold badge "For wounding" (he was already wounded for the fifth time). At that time, the company did not yet know that their commander had been nominated for the award of the Knight's Cross.

In the region of August 10-13, in Reggio nel Emilia from the nearest railway station  
twenty

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seven new "tigers". They also brought two new tank crews. SS navigator Shapme, seeing the new car, rewrote all its numbers: chassis - 2503333, machine gun - 2160, engine - 61202, etc. At the same time, the tank itself had a "mileage" of only 202 kilometers.

The formal liquidation of the 13th heavy tank company led to the emergence of two new heavy tank companies. One of them was commanded by SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling, the other by SS-Untersturmführer Wendorf. Besides everything else. Kling was charged with the formation and staffing of the new 101st tank battalion. The first fully equipped heavy tank company was born on August 14, 1943. As early as August 5, 1943, SS-Sturmbannführer Heinz von Westernhagen was officially appointed commander of the 101st Battalion. At that time, only the organizational foundations of a tank battalion existed. And von Westernhagen himself could not join his battalion. During Operation Citadel, he was severely wounded in the head and underwent treatment for a long time. After the treatment was completed, he had to undergo special training at the armored forces school located in Paris. It was on its base that courses were organized for future commanders of tank battalions. As a result, until the arrival of Westernhagen, Hauptsturmführer Kling remained the real commander of the emerging battalion. They almost immediately formed crews for all 27 Tigers. Preparations have begun. Not only recruits, but also veterans of the 13th heavy tank company had to go through it. The hour-long theoretical classes, which took place in a kind of training class, were a very boring activity for most combat officers.



On July 30, 1943, the [01st Leibstandarte heavy tank battalion] included several new SS Unterscharführers. Among them were Edward Ka

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The crew of SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling. Left to right: Bobby Warmbrunn (gunner), Wolgemuth (radio operator), Heinz Kling, Heinz Reimers (driver), Max Glaube (loader)

Linowski, Walter Hahn, Winfried Lukasius, Wilhelm Irion, Sepp Stich, Paul Vogt. They had just graduated from the SS cadet school, completed special tank training courses and were young candidates for the SS officer rank. Judging by Champ's diaries, the daily routine during this period of time in Italy could hardly be called tense. "August 31, 1943 - there is a party in the platoon. September 1 - bathing in Modena. September 2 — we ride. September 3 - preparation of the company.

Some of the tank officers were on such good terms with the Italians that they were often invited to home dinners. However, all attempts by the Germans to have an affair with local girls ended in constant failure. Rarely did any of the local residents agree to meet with the tankers. The stay of the Germans was not without small incidents.

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In particular, a case with the theft of cheese has come down to us. One day, under cover of night, one of the tankers stole a large head of cheese from a local cheese factory. It was divided among several crews. The local shop owner immediately reported this to the battalion command. A scandal erupted. As a result, Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann examined each tank in search of cheese. Not wanting to run into the wrath of the commander, most of the delinquents preferred to eat the cheese in a hurry. Considering that the cheese was Parmesan brand, they had no desire to steal it for a long time.

On September 8, 1943, the carefree rest of the tankers was put to an end. An order arrived to put the tank battalion on alert. The fact is that the Italians went over to the side of the Anglo-American allies. The leadership of the Reich considered this a betrayal, which made it possible to actively intervene in the internal Italian affairs. The 101st heavy tank battalion of the "Leibstandarte" did not take part in the disarmament of the Italian garrisons. In most cases, the Italians voluntarily laid down their arms. On September 9, 1943, a large number of German troops appeared in the vicinity of Reggio nel Emilia. Landed at the airport. they immediately settled in the towns of La Villa and San Illono. Italian troops, until recently allies of the Germans, were interned. At this point, many members of the 101st Panzer Battalion of the Leibstandarte borrowed black uniform shirts from Italian military depots. In those days it was considered fashionable among tankers to wear a black shirt underneath their camouflage uniforms. In addition, mountain boots, leather belts and special flight suits were taken from military warehouses. At the expense of the Italians, the motor park of the Leibstandarte was also replenished, first of all, this concerned Fiat and Studebaker cars. After that, the tankers were again given rest.

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No.' a. —

Tankers sunbathe in Italy. Right Helmut Wendorf

What else happened during this time? On August 10, 1943, the Leibstandarte tank regiment was fully equipped again after it included the newly formed 1st tank battalion ("panthers"). On September 4, 1943, SS Untersturmführer Helmut Wendorff, who was wounded on the Kursk Bulge, married Anna-Lorena Michel, a twenty-year-old native of Mühlhausen. On September 16, 1943, awards were presented to many German tankmen.

Untersturmführer "Bubi" Wendorff was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Unterscharführer Hans Höll was expecting the same award. This tank commander was considered lucky in his company, for which he even received the joking nickname "SS Held". The gunner from Michael Wittmann's crew, Balthasar Wohl, was also awarded the Iron Cross, First Class. He was only 21 years old, but this native of the Saarland was considered one of the best gunners not only in the Leibstandarte, but in all Germany.

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sky tank troops. In addition, all the wounded crew members of Wittmann and Wendorf were awarded the Iron Cross Second Class.

In September 1943, Untersturmführer Philipsen returned to his company after six months of treatment. Despite the fact that the treatment was completed, it took him a long time to develop his injured leg. The actual command of the 101st tank battalion was carried out by four officers: Kling, Wittmann, Wendorf and Philipsen.

If we talk about the daily practice of tankers staying in Italy, we can note several points. Unexpectedly, the command of the 101st tank battalion was faced with widespread diarrhea among employees, which was the result of eating grapes. It turned out that the local food was not quite familiar to German stomachs. As a result, a strict ban was issued on the use of local grapes.

September 10, 1943. Celebrating the birthday of SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling. Michael Wittmann in the foreground, turned his back to the camera

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The maintenance platoon did not stop its work even on vacation in Reggio nel Emilia

In the twenties, the Italian service "Dopo Lavoro" (an analogue of the German "Strength through Joy") arranged for the German tankers a kind of farewell party. It began in the afternoon on the street, and in the late afternoon was moved to the building. Many of the tankers no longer hesitated to devour treats, as they assumed that this was their last celebration.

On September 23, 1943, the 101st tank battalion of the "Leibstandarte" was sent north to the town of Correggio. There, the tankers themselves lodged at the local school, and the equipment was delivered at the stadium. The daily routine became less and less idle. In fact, the movement to the north was a kind of "friendly occupation" of Italy. During September 1943, units of the Leibstandarte disarmed many Italian garrisons. Turin and Milan were occupied without a fight. These actions did not bypass the 101st tank battalion. At the end of September 1943, several employees of the anti-aircraft artillery platoon of the headquarters company of the 101st heavy tank battalion were forced to escort

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give an echelon with interned Italians, which was heading to Carinthia.

On October 8, 1943, new personnel arrived in the 101st tank battalion. But even after that, the tank companies were not fully manned. All recruits went through an accelerated training course. Now, thanks to the efforts of Wittmann, there were special impromptu highly specialized courses: for gunners, for radio operators, for loaders.

At the same time, the battalion was forced to move to the town of Pontecurone. Traditionally, tankers were located at the school. Free time was used to change the "marking" of the "tigers". Instead of the usual number 13, the letter S was drawn on their towers.

(tyyyyy - heavy). Several numbers were added to this letter, which indicated the number of the platoon and the number of the tank. In addition, the image of the Leibstandarte emblem appeared on the front of the "tigers" - a master key, which was a literal translation of Dietrich's surname.

Leibstandarte soldiers listen to a gramophone in Italy

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In addition, all heavy tanks were painted in autumn camouflage, which was a mixture of ochre, yellow, brown and reddish spots. A platoon of light tanks was disbanded, and a platoon of heavy tanks arose in its place.

In October 1943, the 101st Battalion received at its disposal several high-ranking SS Hauptscharführer Alfred Günther, a non-commissioned officer awarded the Knight's Cross. These were employees of the vehicle fleet of the Reich Chancellery and Hitler's personal escort. Recruits continued to be trained, and the daily routine more and more resembled a combat one.

It is impossible not to mention the event that took place on October 5, 1943. It was on this day that the 3rd tank company appeared in the 101st battalion. It was headed by SS Hauptscharführer, holder of the Knight's Cross Alfred Günther. He was (like most of his subordinates in the company) a native of the Leibstandarte assault gun battalion. At about the same time, the still understaffed tank companies began to receive their field mail indexes. If earlier the 13th heavy tank company had the index 48165, now everything has changed. The headquarters company of the 101st heavy tank battalion had the index - 59450A, the 1st tank company - 59450B, the 2nd tank company - 59450C, the 3rd tank company - 59450r, the technical support company - 59450E.

On October 18, the tank companies of the 101st battalion were once again reorganized. But at the same time, Kling pro

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was to command the 1st company, and Wendorf - the 2nd tank company. Further reorganization continued on 24 October. But three days earlier, on October 21, 1943, it was announced that the SS division "Leibstandarte" would soon be sent back to the front. Immediately, preparations began for its transfer by rail. The original plan was to obtain winter uniforms for the division during its stay in St. Pölten. At the same time, it was not known on which of the fronts the division was supposed to be used. It was not ruled out that it could be the suddenly opened Italian front. In this case, the Germans would have to fight against the Americans who landed in Italy. In any case, from all over Italy, units of the Leibstandarte, which by that time was already called the 1st SS Panzer Division, gathered in St. Peolten. But when units of the division began to receive winter uniforms, no one had any doubts that they were to be sent to the Eastern Front. In his diary, the laconic Champ wrote: "October 27, 1943. Departure to Russia. But at the same time, not all of the 101st heavy tank battalion was manned. In addition, it was supposed to get a few more combat vehicles. As a result, accelerated replenishment began. But they were not able to cope with this task. A separate company had to be replenished by the crews of other tank companies.

Those days were not without incident. When tanks were being loaded onto railroad transport in the Italian town of Voghera, SS-Untersturmführer Sepp Stich stood on the tower to supervise the loading. Suddenly, the tank turret turned and the tanker's head touched the electrical wires. He was killed on the spot. This was not the first accident at the Leibstandarte.

For a while, the "orphaned" company was transferred under

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chalo of Obersturmführer Michalski. He was born in Berlin (Spandau) on January 11, 1920. Even before the start of the Second World War, he got into service in the 8th company of the Leibstandarte. Until November 1942, he was in the ranks of the infantry units of this SS division. For the battles in Kharkov, he was awarded the Iron Cross, first class. As a result, Michalski was transferred to the headquarters company of the 2nd battalion of the Panzergrenadier Regiment "Leibstandarte".

On November 6, 1943, SS-Untersturmführer Philipsen, who again ended up in the hospital with his injured leg, wrote home from Italy: "... This winter we will again head to the East to meet in battle with the Bolsheviks. We have spent the beautiful summer months as occupying troops in northern Italy, but now we must head in terrible haste into the freezing winter to the Eastern Front. Everything is happening the same as last winter, with the exception that now we have to act even faster. I hope that we will be able to win, as we did last year in Kharkov and Belgorod. For us it will be a tough nut to crack, but we will be stronger and stronger than him! There is only one thing for us: the order of the Führer, and we will follow it! Our first units have already reached the Eastern Front."

"Tigers" and other vehicles of the 13th heavy tank company were loaded onto railway trains on November 1-2, 1943. At that time, the reformed 13th Heavy Tank Company consisted of five (1) tank platoons of five Tigers each. As a result, the company commander, who was also the crew commander, SS Hauptsturmführer Kling, had a total of 27 "tigers" under his command. This was a very powerful tank unit. In addition to Wendorf and Wittmann, already familiar to us, who led the 1st and 2nd tank platoons, respectively. The commanders of the remaining tank platoons were untersturm

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Führers SS Eduard Kalinowski (3rd platoon), Walter Hahn (4th platoon) and Fritz Hartel (5th platoon). Let's get to know these SS tankmen better.

Eduard Kalinowski was born on February 3, 1912 in Frankfurt am Main. By profession he was a brewer, but with the outbreak of World War II, he volunteered for the 2nd company of the 9th SS Infantry Regiment. For his actions on the Eastern Front, he was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class. As part of the Westland battalion in May 1942, he ended up in the ranks of the SS division Reich. In January 1943, in the tank regiment of this SS division. After completing training at the SS Junker School in Bad Tölz on July 30, 1943, Kalinowski, already in the rank of SS Unterscharführer, ended up in the 101st tank battalion of the Leibstandarte. | September 1943 in Italy he was awarded the rank of SS-Unter-Sturmführer.

Walter Hahn was born on June 9, 1913 in Cologne. Before the war, he served as an official. From the authorities, he moved to military service. At first, he served in the 9th SS Infantry Regiment, and later, like Kalinowski, he ended up in the SS Reich Division. In many ways, their biographies were similar. After completing his studies at the SS Junker School with the rank of SS Oberscharführer, he ended up in a heavy tank battalion of the 1st SS Panzer Division. On September 1, 1943, he also advanced through the ranks and received the rank of SS-Untersturmführer.

Fritz Hartel was born on May 10, 1914 in East Prussia in the town of Grunhagen. His parents were peasants, but the young man was not interested in agriculture, and therefore, in February 1934, he voluntarily joined the newly formed service of the Imperial Labor Service. He later became an instructor in a sports battalion. But he did not stay long in the Imperial labor service. On July 30, 1934, Fritz Hartel joined the 9th company of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler. In the rank of Unterscharführer Hartel at

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October 1943. Start of preparations for leaving Italy

took part in all combat operations of the Leibstandarte. Before joining a tank regiment in 1942, he had already been awarded the Iron Cross, the gold badge for wounding and the badge for attack. Hartel was in a company of heavy tanks from the very moment of her birth. In the rank of SS Hauptscharführer, he participated in the battles for Kharkov and on the Kursk Bulge. November 9, 1943 he was awarded the title of SS-Untersturmführer.

#### Chapter 5 AGAIN TO THE EAST

The organization of the company under the command of Kling (we will temporarily call it the 13th tank company of the 101st battalion) was very unusual not only for the Waffen-SS, but for all German tank forces. The fact is that twenty-seven "tigers" were a strong strike unit, which had exceptional power.

On October 30, 1943, an order came to the Leibstandarte, which contained instructions not to unload the tanks from the trains in St. Pölten, but to immediately send them to Ukraine. It should be noted that this order did not correspond to the tactical purpose of the SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte. Moreover, there were many difficulties with the transfer.

On November 11, 1943, four echelons with "tigers" arrived in Berdichev. You can learn about the route of these echelons from the diary of the same Shamp. "October 27, 1943 - departure, Voghera, Cremona, Verona, Mantua, Padua; October 28 — Treviso, Pinzano, Guénon, Garina; 29.10 — at 14:20 we cross the border with the Reich, Arnoldstein; 30.10 - Semmering, Neumarkt, Leben, Vienna; 31.10 - Moravian lands, Oderberg; 1.11 - Lviv; 2.11 - Ternopil; 3.11 - Kasatin; 4.11 - Fastov. 5.11 — around 11 o'clock we arrive in Krivoy Rog. Night in the tank.

In mid-October 1942, units of the 2nd Ukrainian Front under the command of Konev were able to gain a foothold

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on three bridgeheads along the banks of the Dnieper east of Kremenchug. Soviet troops planned to develop an offensive against the industrial region of Krivoy Rog. On October 25, 1943, Dnepropetrovsk was liberated by the Red Army. With the forces of the German 1st Panzer Army, the command of the Army Group "South" intended to counterattack the advancing Soviet units. At the same time, units of the 4th Ukrainian Front, whose positions were located much to the south, continued to push the German troops from Army Group A. The Red Army occupied Melitopol and from day to day was to gain control over the Isthmus of Perekop. To consolidate the strategic success of the Soviet troops, on November 3, 1943, units of the 1st Ukrainian Front, commanded by General Vatutin, launched an offensive from two sides of Kyiv. General Vatutin sent thirty infantry divisions, twenty-four tank brigades and ten motorized infantry brigades into the offensive. The Germans could not resist such an onslaught. November 6, 1943 Kyiv was liberated. The next day, the Germans were driven out of Fastov, a city located 60 kilometers southwest of Kyiv. It was there, at the key railway junction, that trains with Leibstandarte tanks were supposed to arrive. On November 11, Radomyshl and Teterev were liberated, and two days later, units of the Red Army took Zhitomir. The northern flank of Army Group South was actually crushed. Several German divisions were threatened with encirclement and total annihilation. The situation required the German command to take urgent countermeasures. As a result, the SS division "Leibstandarte" was once again used as a kind of "fire brigade", which was supposed to correct the critical situation in this sector of the Eastern Front.

In addition to the SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte, the planned German counteroffensive was also to take part in the 1st Panzer Division, which

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Paradise was hastily assembled in Kirovohrad, where the headquarters of Army Group South was located at that moment. It was with the help of these two tank divisions that the German command intended to correct the situation on the northern flank of the positions of the army group. At the same time, the Leibstandarte itself found itself in a very unfavorable situation. All units that had just unloaded from the railway echelons were immediately sent into battle. Most of them were actually not ready for battle. At that time, the Leibstandarte was not a single division, but consisted of separate units that entered the battle as they arrived.

Kling's 13th Panzer Company unloaded on 14 November 1943. At that moment there were only eighteen Tigers under Kling's command, nine of which were in need of maintenance.

Company Kling unloaded somewhat at a distance from Fastov. On November 15, 1943, it was at the disposal of SS Obersturmbannführer Hugo Kraas, who commanded the 2nd Panzer Regiment of the Leibstandarte. The forces of the Leibstandarte Panzer Division, which were at the disposal of the command of Army Group South, were to attack in a northerly direction, moving along the road that connected Zhytomyr and Kyiv. The right flank of the advancing Leibstandarte was to be covered by units of the 25th Panzer Division and the SS Reich Division. The main blow to the Soviet positions was still to be delivered by the SS Leibstandarte division, supported by the 1st Panzer Division.

On November 15, 1943, the Tigers began to move behind the advancing units of the 2nd Panzer Regiment of the Leibstandarte. At that time, the attack was carried out between the settlements of Kornin and Lisovka. That the attack of the Leibstandarte tanks was successful. not only the quickly occupied territories spoke, but also the intercepted Soviet radio message: "Tanks are advancing. I'm trying to repel the attack. Not enough ammo

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and fuel. If they don't, we're lost." By evening, the positions of the Leibstandarte passed along the following line: Turbovka (reconnaissance battalion of the 1st tank regiment), Vodoty (1st tank regiment), Brusilov (2nd panzergrenadier regiment). It was in these battles that the "tigers" participated in their entire mass.

The next day, the 11th company of the 1st tank regiment of the Leibstandarte was able to take the village of Vodoty. SS Rothenführer Schmidt described this battle as follows: "It was still dark in Lok, our 11th company under the command of SS Obersturmführer Rudy Schmidt advanced to a relatively safe sector of the front. 1st Platoon was ordered to patrol positions to the right of this small village. Digging has begun. So far there has been no fire contact with the enemy. It was midnight when firing was heard in the rear of the 1st platoon and tracer bullets began to fly over its positions. The shooting intensified, and the sound of the battle was approaching... The 2nd and 3rd platoons, led by our company commander, Obersturmführer Schmidt, tried to break through to the Soviet positions under the cover of darkness. Our armored personnel carriers were too close to each other. Our grenadiers, torn from sleep by battle, were often unarmed. When dawn came, we noticed that the Soviet positions were located some 100 meters from us. Soviet soldiers were armed with machine guns and anti-tank rifles. As a result, each of our attacks was repulsed, and all armored personnel carriers were beaten or burned. Our commander, Obersturmführer Schmidt, was one of the first to fall in battle, a bullet hit him in the head. The attack of our 1st platoon, which was supposed to cover and save the sleeping grenadiers, bogged down under Soviet fire. In this situation, Unterscharführer Rudi Renger became the savior angel. He went under heavy fire for help. On the outskirts of the village, he came across "tigers". The tankers had their own orders, but Renger was able to convince them that the situation was critical. They had to fight to save

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11th company. When the "tigers" attacked the Soviet positions, the Red Army had no chance. But at the same time, none of them left their positions. All of them were buried

in broken trenches.

Renger collided on the outskirts of the village, two kilometers from the battlefield, with part of the tank platoon of Eduard Kalinowski. He, along with two tanks, was catching up with his company after undergoing a fleeting repair. He violated the order when he went to the rescue of the 11th company in the village of Vodoty. Rudi Renger was commended for his ingenuity.

If we talk about the Soviet troops, then the offensive on the Vodothy-Brusilov sector was carried out by the forces of the 894th Infantry Regiment (211th Infantry Division). As a result, the units of this regiment had to face the "tigers". One of them was commanded by SS-Oberscharführer Jurgen Brandt. Acting at his own discretion, "Captain Brandt" (as he was called in the company) attacked the Red Army units from the flank. As a result, the striking power of several "tigers" was quite enough to crush the Soviet positions - the Red Army clearly did not expect the appearance of heavy tanks. As noted in the war diary, "Brandt's brave act was able to save the company, which had lost its commander, from complete annihilation." Meanwhile, a little further south, the "Tigers" under the command of Kling attacked Soviet tanks.

Further text was taken from Haupt-Sturmführer Kling's presentation to the Golden German Cross: "On November 16, 1943, a reinforced Soviet battalion was able to take the village of Lisovka on the move. SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling was part of the battle group, which was tasked with capturing the turn of the road, and then attacking the enemy with five "tigers" with little infantry support. His prudent command, which was complemented by the aggressiveness of the maneuver, led to the fact that the village was recaptured from the enemy. During this operation, eight heavy anti-tank

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enemy guns and most of the Russian artillery battalion. The key to the success of these actions was the personal courage of Hauptsturmführer Kling, who, thanks to his tactical success, was able to ensure the advancement of many units of the division north.

Sturmmann Champ took two fights that day: at 11:45 and at 16:00. During this duel, Shampa's tank was hit in the turret and in the transmission mechanism. Bobby Warmbrunn wrote in his diary: "Evening battle in Fastov, 76.2 mm gun destroyed." For Warmbrunn, this battle was special - the fact is that for the first time he acted here as a gunner in the crew of the "Tiger".

On November 17, 1943, the Tigers, together with several armored personnel carriers and tank destroyers of the Cricket (Grille) type from the 14th heavy company of the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte, attacked the village of Luchin. This offensive was supposed to eliminate the threat of a Soviet attack from the flank. At maximum speed, ten "tigers" and armored personnel carriers broke into the village. It was at this moment that the Soviet reinforced regiment entered the position, which was supported by tanks and numerous anti-tank guns. Possessing longer-range 88 mm guns, the Tigers opened fire on Soviet positions from a certain distance. At the same time, almost every shot hit the target, destroying either a Soviet gun or an anti-tank gun. At the same time, the Soviet units did not think of retreating, the largely unequal battle continued until all Soviet forces were destroyed. But at the same time, the Germans themselves suffered losses. Regarding this fight, Champ wrote: "7 hours 30 minutes. On tanks we are rushing to anti-tank guns. Hit after hit is ahead." Still, the advantage was on the side of the "Tigers": in this battle, five T-34s and several Soviet guns were destroyed. After the fight, which

lasted half a

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an hour, Luchin was in the hands of the Germans. The battle at Luchin was offensive, very characteristic of the Naiper battle group. He later described: "Armored personnel carriers and tanks attacked the village like cavalymen from several sides. They moved at full speed

dodging all shots. But the Soviet units did not let the SS battle group rest. Almost immediately, a counterattack was launched to recapture the village. At night, the counterattack was repeated from the side of the village of Fedorovka. Kling's tanks were able to repel the Soviet attack, which was inflicted by the forces of about a battalion. The next day, the attack was repeated - this time from the direction of the village of Golyaki. The battle was so strong that sometimes it seemed that the German tanks were about to be knocked out of Luchin.

However, the "tigers" took very good positions - in the end, each of them was able to knock out several Soviet tanks. By noon, the battle flared up with renewed vigor. This time, units of the Red Army still managed to enter the outskirts of the village. The decision to send into battle a reserve battalion of panzergrenadiers, commanded by Sturmbannführer Sahnlig, was already being considered. But in the end, this reserve remained in Lisovka. Soviet troops tried to bypass Luchin from the north, which would allow them to strike at the flank of the Leibstandarte. A powerful tank attack was supported by the fire of the Soviet artillery, which fired continuously from the direction of the village of Golyaki. At the same time, units of the Red Army continued to advance southeast of the village of Dyvin with a powerful blow. Rolf Champ's "Tiger" had to repulse the Soviet offensive almost alone. Champ himself later wrote in his diary: "9 o'clock, attack. Stalin organs, artillery. The only "tiger". During this battle, gunner Warmbrunn managed to knock out two Soviet tanks and two anti-tank guns. While in Lucina, the "tigers" were able to withstand virtually any attack. However, advice

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Panzer from the flanks forced them to retreat. During these two days of fighting, Kling's tank company knocked out thirteen T-34s, twenty-five heavy anti-tank guns. Naturally, no one counted the number of field guns, machine guns and anti-tank rifles. On the same day, the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte, commanded by SS Obersturmbannführer Albert Frei, succeeded in securing a foothold in the village of Kocherovo on the Zhitomir-Kiev road. This prevented the Soviet troops from developing a swift offensive. It was assumed that the 1st German Panzer Division was supposed to take Zhytomyr on November 19th. But in the end, the plans were adjusted. The German units had to attack the Soviet troops and tie down their advance in the Kocherovo area. During the offensive of the German XXXXXX (48th) tank corps, the position of the Red Army in Zhytomyr could become critical. As a result, the Soviet troops hurriedly created a fortified line that stretched along the line: Fastov - Golyaki - Brusilov - Privorotye - the bank of the river Viliya - Teterev - Studenitsa. But when this frontier began to be created, the Leibstandarte was already in Kocherovo. On the night of November 19, the 1st and 9th German Panzer Divisions were able to capture Zhytomyr. After that, units of the 1st Panzer Division turned north to link up with the Leibstandarte at Kocherovo. On the morning of November 19, 1943, the Tigers left their positions in Luchin - in these positions they were replaced by units of the 25th Panzer Division. Kling's heavy tank company headed for the village of Morosovka. To attack her, the tankers planned to bypass the settlement from the south. But this was only an intermediate goal. The main tactical goal at that time was the capture of Brusilov, which was scheduled for November 20, 1943. Champ described this attack, which was commanded by Michael Wittmann: "10 hours. Untersturmführer Wittmann launched the attack. Three shots knocked out two

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tank guns." During this battle, gunner Warmbrunn knocked out one T-34 and one Soviet anti-tank gun. In addition to the Tigers, the SS reconnaissance battalion, commanded by Sturmbannführer Knittel, took part in the attack. The next day, the offensive was to continue from the vicinity of Morosovka in the direction of the villages of Krakowshchina and Khomutets. The Wittmann battle group was supposed to take these settlements in order to cover the right flank of the Leibstandarte.

On November 20, 1943, the reinforced 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Leibstandarte (without a tank battalion) launched an offensive from two sides of the road linking Vodothy and Brusilov. But



Simultaneously, a Soviet counteroffensive followed. Morosovka, occupied by the Germans, was attacked by units of the Red Army from the east and northeast. But the Soviet attack was unsuccessful. Almost immediately, the Russian tanks ran into the Tigers. In the very first hour of the battle, about twenty T-34s were shot down. At the same time, the Germans themselves lost only one "Tiger". As a result, the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Battalion (Sturmpannführer Zandig) was already fighting at 4:15 in the morning one and a half kilometers from Brusilov. The battle moved to the forest, where the Soviet trench ended on both sides in impassable swamps. But at dawn the German advance was halted by massive Soviet artillery fire. Zandig's battalion tried to flank the Soviet positions, but ran into swamps, where they were covered by Soviet shells. To the west of Brusilov, the offensive was carried out by a unit of Sturmpannführer Kuhlmann. His tank battalion, equipped with "panthers", entrenched itself in the village of Piliponka, from where it tried to attack. At 05:45, the command of the division decided to stop the senseless and bloody attacks.

Meanwhile, a company of "tigers" was able to wedge itself into the council

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sky positions to a depth of three kilometers. At this time, a couple of heavy tanks were hit. Jürgen Brandt's crew volunteered to cover them. The crews of the wrecked "tigers" worked feverishly to urgently repair their combat vehicles. Standing on the turret of a tank, Brandt noticed a Soviet battalion column approaching in the distance. Knowing that they would soon be noticed, Brandt made a risky decision. He started the "tiger" and rushed towards the battalion of the Red Army. Not allowing the Soviet crews to come to their senses, the German tanker immediately began to shoot trucks and armored vehicles. As a result, the battalion was destroyed in a matter of minutes. Despite the fact that Brandt's tank was damaged in this battle, it was able to reach the German positions, where it was immediately repaired by the maintenance company.

But for the "Leibstandarte" as a whole, this day was not very successful. A direct hit from a shell in the village of Solovyovka killed the commander of a tank regiment of the 1st SS division, Obersturmpannführer Schoenberger. As a result, the command of the Leibstandarte tanks was taken over by the battalion commander Johan Peiper, who had previously commanded the strike group of armored personnel carriers. Piper had long been known in the division as a daredevil who never lost his temper by not letting his emotions control his mind. In addition, from the very beginning of World War II, Peiper was considered a good connoisseur of tank battle tactics. But now he had to demonstrate his capabilities already in the role of regiment commander.

On November 21, 1943, another German attack was made on Brusilov. During this offensive, the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment managed to gain a foothold in the forest, which approached directly to this small town from the southwest. The 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, located somewhat to the west, was able to capture the village of Privorotye and was approaching the village

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Lakers. On this day, Wittmann's tank was hit, the squad leader had to urgently transfer to another one. The gunner Warmbrunn recalled that day: "Wittmann was wounded and shivering, but, however, he planned to continue the offensive. He was to serve as a living example and inspire confidence in his subordinates. Numerous tank battles have turned us into a well-coordinated team. I turned out to be the gunner, and he took command of the tank. Wittmann told me everything in detail and gave orders. In addition, he had to see the battlefield as a whole and command an entire unit at once. As a result, I had to act almost independently. On that day, I knocked out thirteen T-34s and destroyed seven anti-tank guns. Wittmann patted me on the shoulder in a friendly manner. I was proud, because for me it was the highest award."

On November 22, 1943, the German 19th Panzer Division, located on the eastern flank, was to move forward through Ulshka. The Leibstandarte division was to advance through

Dyvin and Ulshka in the direction of Yastrebenka. After this settlement was taken, the SS Panzer Division should turn and attack Brusilov from the east. In this important operation, the Germans had high hopes for the POWER of the "tigers".

On the evening of November 21, a discussion of the future operation took place. Michael Wittmann studied in detail all the maps at his disposal. He continued to think until late at night, calculating the attack to the smallest detail. It was very typical for him to almost never break away from his official duties. While the other tankers were moving away from the shocks of the battles, he sat silently, immersed in his thoughts, which were dedicated to the upcoming tank operations. When Wittmann considered himself fully prepared for the upcoming operation, he discussed its details with other tank commanders. Almost everyone in the division knows

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whether that he was a tanker from God. He participated in every attack and constantly increased the number of tanks he knocked out. According to his tactical moves and examples, they studied not only in the Leibstandarte, but also in many other tank divisions on the Eastern Front.

On the night of November 22, the "tigers" were put on alert. At 5 hours 55 minutes, three of them launched an attack from the north on Ulshka and Yastrebenka. The tanks were covered by the 1st Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment (Sturmabführer Hans Becker). The 2nd battalion of the same regiment followed somewhat at a distance, at any moment ready to join the battle. At 7 o'clock in the morning, Soviet attack aircraft and dive bombers unleashed a flurry of fire on the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. At the same time, fire was opened from Soviet positions. Despite the fact that such a shelling violated the order of the advancing Germans, they were quickly able to restore them. The SS grenadiers were covered from the flank by "tigers". By 10 o'clock in the morning the battle group was only one and a half kilometers south of Yastrebenka. But there was virtually no strength to continue the offensive. Under these conditions, SS-Obersturmbannführer Kraas throws his reserve into battle - twenty-five medium tanks of the RU type. As a result, at 13 o'clock the German offensive continued.

This time, the Tigers were ahead. After the offensive resumed, the crews were able to spot flashes of numerous anti-tank guns in the distance. To the south of Yastrebenka, a powerful Soviet anti-tank defensive line was created. German tanks were fired from all types of weapons. "Gigry" almost immediately received numerous hits. Often shells flew off them. At some point, Soviet tanks dug into the ground opened fire on German heavy tanks, which were disguised as haystacks. If in this situation the "tigers" had stopped, they would have turned into an excellent target, which ended in their inevitable

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destruction. Under these conditions, it was decided to attack from the flank. The maneuver had to be carried out directly under fire. The tank of Eduard Kalinowski was hit many times - as a result, the muzzle of his gun was bent. But the offensive did not die out. The advancing German units were able to break into Yastrebenka at 16:15. This was largely because Soviet artillery fire was focused on the Tigers. The German grenadiers entered into street battles with the Red Army. By 6 p.m. the battle was over. The village was occupied by the Germans. During this battle, two Soviet self-propelled artillery mounts and twenty-four anti-tank guns were destroyed.

When Kling was presented to the German Cross in gold, the documents also mentioned a company of "tigers". "On November 22, 1943, a tank group attacked the village of Yastrebenka, in which the enemy entrenched himself and created a powerful defense system. Moving in the first zone of the advancing units, Kling's company was forced to bear the brunt of an incredibly powerful anti-tank defense system. Despite numerous shell hits and heavy losses, Kling was able not only to eliminate the threat of a Soviet strike from

flank, but also in his courageous style of fighting broke into the location of anti-tank guns located on the southern outskirts of the village, which opened the way to this settlement for the rest of the attacking units.

Rolf Schamp, in that battle the gunner in the "tiger" of SS Unter-Scharführer Hans Höld, recalled the battle of Yastrebenka: "The sun was shining. Before us stretched a grassy slope, which allowed us to look at all the surroundings as a whole. We saw a field 800-1000 meters long, beyond which a long forest began. The position of the enemy was unknown to us. We had to advance in the direction of the forest. We had only a few tanks, and therefore the offensive was considered a medium-scale operation. Went back and climbed into

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tanks. There was a command: "Tanks forward." We liked to serve together. Höld as a tank commander, me as a gunner. We suited each other. We overcame the slope, when we reached the ridge, the tanks drove forward for some time due to inertia. We only saw for a few meters how suddenly the whole forest turned into a sea of flames. We were under heavy fire! Gun salvos were somewhat reminiscent of fireworks. We felt that our tank was being hit more and more often. Then our car shook. It smelled of ozone. Our driver yelled, "My collarbone is broken." I myself was bleeding down my face. I turned around. Höld sat leaning forward. I asked: "Unterscharführer, what are we going to do?" And then I noticed that something slimy was flowing from his nostrils. Höld himself did not answer. I noticed that he had something that looked like a pin sticking out between his eyebrows. Here we are hit again. Here I already acted instinctively. I turned to the mechanic and yelled: "Drive." The tank was still able to move. When we moved behind the slope, I examined Höld. He was dead." Höld was later posthumously promoted to the rank of SS-Oberscharführer.

On November 23, the German offensive continued northeast of Yastrebenka. The 1st Panzer Division was to move through the village of Lazarovka, where it was to link up with the Leibstandarte to advance further on Brusilov. At the same time, the weather began to deteriorate, and the movement of equipment over open areas became difficult. It rained all night. By the beginning of the new day of the offensive, only four Tigers were left in Kling's company ready for operation. At 12:30 these "tigers" and a tank group from the 2nd Battalion of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment and the 3rd Tank Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment passed through the village of Dubrovka and attacked Lazarovka. During this engagement, Bobby Warmbrunn knocked out four T-34s and destroyed three anti-tank guns. After that, the "tigers" were refueled in the village of Mestechko, which

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was a little to the north. Taking into account the ever-increasing number of Soviet tanks and the strengthening of anti-tank lines, Kling was required to be extremely careful in his movements and maximum concentration of efforts during attacks. Gunners and commanders of tank crews had to thoroughly study the landscape in order to timely identify well-camouflaged anti-tank defense installations. During the battle, the gunner had to almost instantly identify the next target.

Loader Walter Lau, who more than once had to act as a gunner, wrote: "Many times our fire was regulated as follows. The loader was given a signal: "Prepare the machine gun for firing." The target was detected by tracer bullets sent in its direction. The tower followed them. Naturally, this method was not used during tank battles, but only when the target was hidden in a village or camouflaged in the landscape."

On November 24 and 25, 1943, the "tigers" did not take part in the battles. Their crews were given a break, which was to be used to repair heavy tanks and prepare for new battles. On November 26, the "Tigers" were again sent on the offensive. This time they

the target was the village of Negrebovka. They were supposed to break through the Soviet defenses in this area and move towards Radomyshl.

At that time, the crews of the "tigers" were worried not so much by Soviet tanks, but by well-prepared and powerful anti-tank defensive lines. A frontal attack on such defenses, which consisted of a wide front of 76.2 mm anti-tank guns, usually resulted in huge losses. Kling could not allow this. When it was assumed that there was a well-camouflaged Soviet anti-tank line ahead, one single gun was launched in its direction.

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vein "tiger". Usually it was the platoon leader's tank. He was supposed to conduct reconnaissance in battle. Moving along the ridge so that the rest of the tanks were not visible, he provoked the Soviet artillerymen to open fire on him from a decent distance. At the same time, all firing points of the Red Army were identified. This practice was associated with great risk. In many ways, the safety of the crew of such a reconnaissance tank depended on the skill of the driver, who had to urgently leave the "battlefield" after the first shot was fired, that is, the location of the camouflaged anti-tank line was revealed.

Walter Lau, loading in the crew of Helmut "Bubi" Wendorff, recalled one of these reconnaissance missions. "We drove forward so that the Ivans would lose their temper and open fire on us. We had to find ourselves under an artillery barrage. Later, when refueling, we counted a total of twenty-eight dents on our "Tiger" from shells. Some of them were barely visible, but some were quite fist-sized. Almost all hits were on the frontal armor. At the very moment when our tank was under a shower of shells, we heard Bubi Wendorff say in his characteristic Berlin accent: "Man, you are in the very epicenter of the war."

Michael Wittmann also hated the well-camouflaged anti-tank guns that seemed to be hidden everywhere. At the same time, the Soviet tanks did not cause him any noticeable concern. He considered only Soviet anti-tank guns to be a real threat. For this reason, the destruction of an anti-tank gun meant much more to him than a destroyed Soviet T-34 tank. In one of the materials, a propaganda company described the threat posed by anti-tank guns as follows:

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The war has taken on a completely new look. Hundreds of Soviet regiments were scattered across the territory with anti-tank guns and rifles of all calibers, barriers and powerful defensive lines. They hid in the villages or right in the field along every road, firing at which they could cause significant damage to our tanks. It was a serious test. The growing hatred for the almost invisible enemy, who allowed the seemingly forgotten struggle of man against tank to be resumed, grew not only in Michael Wittmann. The tank was no longer a test of nerves. The anti-tank guns turned out to be a real devil!"

If we talk about the daily practice of those battles, then the total absence of salt turned out to be a complete surprise for the tankers. Field kitchens prepared meals without this important food component.

Or another interesting episode. In one of the Ukrainian villages, tankers met an ancient old woman who began to predict their future. They began to listen to her for fun. They then asked which of them would return alive from the war. Some she promised a return, some she didn't. When the question was asked: who would win the war, Stalin or Hitler, she answered that it was Hitler.

On November 27, 1943, units of the Leibstandarte continued to wage bloody battles. After these battles, the Soviet troops were forced to temporarily retreat to the east and northeast. The grenadiers of the 1st SS Panzer Division wanted to organize a pursuit, but could not do so due to the fact that almost all roads were washed out by rain.

On November 28, a company of "tigers" under the command of Kling, together with the 3rd battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, launched an offensive north of the village of Zabelochye in order to further develop the offensive on Radomyshl. Later, the regimental commander would write: "In the extremely difficult conditions of the forest landscape, from time to time, is it completely

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Kling, an infantry support officer, was the first to reach the strategic highway and then take Hill 153.4. Pursuing the retreating enemy, he did not pay attention to the positions of his infantry, located on the right. He was able to turn his retreat into a chaotic rout. Finally, having only his own tank at his disposal, on the approaches to Garborov, he was able to make passages in the darkness in numerous minefields. Then he managed to destroy many enemy anti-tank guns. As a result, the tank could only fight with a machine gun. But even under these conditions, Kling played a decisive role in the capture of the village. Bobby Warmbrunn, who often had to be Kling's gunner, was able to knock out a T-34 that day and destroy an anti-tank gun.

After this offensive, the crews of the "Tigers" expected a short respite as an operational reserve from November 29 to | December 1943. These few days, heavy tanks were located southwest of Radomyshl. An outstanding break in the battles was used with might and main by the maintenance company. Her soldiers had to work without sleep and rest in order to put all the tanks in order for the next battle. Shamp recalled these people and the soldiers of the supply platoon: "They worked with all their might. Sweat flowed from them. But our comrades behaved steadfastly and courageously. The boys shone like Christmas tree garlands when they found our tanks despite the snow and mud. Only we could judge how dangerous their work was. Almost unarmed, they brought us fuel and ammunition, risking at any moment to become easy prey for the enemy, who could suddenly appear. In November-December 1943, we often saw them on three-axle Italian cars (probably Fiat), which were shod with huge tires. There was a strange mixture of fuel, ammunition and provisions in the cars." On November 29, 1943, the shock group of Johan Piper was able to take the village of Gardov. Directly

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Several Soviet units were defeated in its vicinity.

If we talk about the losses of the "Leibstandarte" after returning to the Eastern Front, then by November 30, 1943 they amounted to 363 people killed, 1289 - wounded, 32 - missing. The largest (in percentage terms) losses were suffered by the SS panzergrenadier regiments. So, for example, by the beginning of the winter of 1943/44, the 1st battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment consisted of only 103 military personnel (3 officers, 10 non-commissioned officers, 90 soldiers). In other battalions, the situation was somewhat better, but this did not change the picture as a whole. By the indicated moment, the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment had 795 people in its ranks (27 officers, 87 non-commissioned officers, 681 soldiers). The number of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment was even smaller (21 officers, 86 non-commissioned officers, 628 soldiers).

Junior ranks at one of the "tigers" of the Leibstandarte

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The attack of XXXXXUSH (48th) of the German tank corps on the flank of the units of the 1st Ukrainian Front stopped the Soviet offensive for a while. Having advanced to Zhitomir, the Germans actually cut off the path of the Red Army to the system of good roads located south of the Pripyat swamps.

But at the same time, the Soviet troops only retreated and stopped their offensive, but were by no means defeated, as planned by the command of Army Group South.

By this time, the Soviet command was able to concentrate the forces of the 60th Army to the northeast of Zhitomir. In the event of a Soviet offensive, the Red Army had a good chance of success, which could result in the return of the city. To prevent such a scenario from developing, the command of Army Group South ordered XXXXIII Panzer Corps to attack the Soviet forces, which were gathering on the sector of the front bounded by the Teterev River and the Zhitomir-Korosten highway. This German offensive caught the Soviet command by surprise. Some sluggishness in making a decision led to the XIII German Army Corps being able to launch an offensive in the direction of the Teterev River, where it was supposed to close positions with the IX (59th) Corps. "Settlement of the situation" (this is how offensive operations were often called in German staff language) between Zhytomyr and Korosten became a new task for the Leibstandarte.

The offensive of the 1st SS Panzer Division in this area just north of Zhytomyr began on December 2, 1944. At that moment, a company of heavy tanks under the command of Kling was in the village of Silyanshchina. By December 4, 1943, Kling had only four Tigers ready for use. Twelve combat vehicles needed current repairs, and nine more needed major repairs. As a result, out of twenty-five "tigers" of Kling's company, only a sixth of them could take part in the battles. But even so, four or five "tigers"

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could be a formidable fighting force. All tanks that arrived from repair were immediately sent into battle. In most cases, they were not even allowed to rejoin their company. Such scattered and dispersed use of "tigers" was a headache for SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling, who understood that the striking power of a tank could only manifest itself in a group of similar tanks.

Rolf Champ recalled those December days in 1943: "In November 1943, a company of Tigers was scattered throughout the Zhytomyr region. Often, individual crews did not know at all where their company was located. In those days I saw Wittmann only once. I saw the same Kling only a couple of times, once in November, the other in December. Since our "Tiger" and I sometimes acted alone in certain sectors of the front, we maintained contact with the company through motorcyclist liaisons, and occasionally through truck drivers who delivered fuel, shells and food to us.

As a rule, powerful "tigers" were the basis for shock panzergrenadier groups. The commanders of the German grenadiers always welcomed the appearance of a heavy tank in their unit. Soon the entire Leibstandarte division became aware of the unusually large size of the company of heavy tanks under the command of Kling. It was during such December battles that Wittmann and his crew were able to destroy thirteen T-34s and hit seven heavy anti-tank guns in just one day. During the battles of late 1943, such a "score" ceased to be something extraordinary. But Wittmann was the undisputed leader in terms of the number of destroyed Soviet tanks and anti-tank guns. This circumstance made him a kind of informal commander of a company of heavy tanks. Among the tankers of the Leibstandarte, he enjoyed unquestioned authority. In the company, close friends called him "Michel". He does not return

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pity. It is significant that successes did not turn his head and did not become an occasion for arrogance. A 29-year-old native of the Upper Palatinate, constantly immersed in his own thoughts, gradually turned from a talented junior commander into an expert in military tactics tank battles. As one of the eyewitnesses recalled: "He was a hard worker, a man who created his own destiny. He carefully prepared for every fight. But when the battle began, he

acted quickly, as if he had a special stopwatch inside. Taking into account Wittmann's tactical talent, a special modification was made to his tank. His car was equipped with a special periscopic observation device, which allowed him to inspect the battlefield without protruding halfway out of the turret hatch. These were the so-called "scissors" - a binocular periscope. Wittmann knew about the advantage of the "scissors" as early as 1941, when he served on an assault gun. In those days, almost all German self-propelled artillery mounts were equipped with this very useful device.

By December 5, 1943, the heavy tank company had destroyed a total of two hundred and five T-34s and one hundred and thirty Soviet anti-tank guns. We emphasize that this includes the battles for Kharkov, the Battle of Kursk (Operation Citadel) and winter battles in Ukraine. This number does not include the countless armored personnel carriers, field artillery, armored cars, trucks, and so on.

December 5, 1943 for the "Tigers" was given another break. But at the same time, all the remaining parts of the Leibstandarte continued to fight. The command of the division formed a special "strike group", which, by deceptive maneuver through Zhytomyr, was supposed to divert the attention of the Soviet troops. In fact, the entire day was spent in preparation for a new offensive. The forces of the 1st, 7th Panzer divisions and the SS division "Leibstandarte" were concentrated north of the city

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Chernyakhov. At the same time, the new commander of the Leibstandarte tank regiment, Johan Peiper, paid special attention to a company of heavy tanks. He took into account not only the power of this unit, but also the experience of the tankers who served in it. It was Peiper who introduced SS Hauptsturmführer Kling to the German Cross in Gold on December 5, 1943. "Lod, by his outstanding command, the Tiger company achieved amazing combat results, which is a consequence of the exceptional vigor of its commander," Peiper wrote in his presentation to the high award. On that day, almost all non-commissioned officers of the company, who had not previously received high awards, were presented with the Iron Crosses. For example, SS navigator Bobby Warmbrunn was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. By that time, he had knocked out forty-seven Soviet tanks as a gunner.

But this pleasant moment could hardly change the situation radically. Walter Lau described how the tankers spent the icy December nights of 1943: "Very often we spent the night guarding about 30-50 meters behind the fighting outposts of the Panzergrenadiers. One person was awake while the remaining four crew members were sleeping right in the tank. The cold was terrible. After three or four hours, the inside of the tank was covered with ice, more like a stalactite cave. Our clothes froze directly to the iron walls of the car. When the situation allowed, we started the engine every hour to keep the inside of the tank a little warmer. But often located near the position of the enemy did not allow us to do this. During this lull, we had plenty of time to talk and share our personal stories. We ended up knowing everything about each other after a while." Such an attitude made it possible to form in the company not just good official, but truly comradely

relationship.

On December 5, 1943, the Leibstandarte shock tank group, consisting of an SS tank regiment, battle

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she received armored personnel carriers, the 2nd company of the 1st sapper regiment and an anti-aircraft artillery battery, received a special task. This group was supposed to advance from Chernyakhov and bypass Radomysl, held by the Soviet troops, from the west. Through the village of Andreev, German armored vehicles were supposed to attack the village of Styrt. It was it that was the first in the break between fights. From the left, the tactical target of the Germans is to the right: Letsch, Warmbrunn, Kleber, which tanks on the way to Rado-Biztmenrchi Wol

I think. Actually ass

The purpose of the Leibstandarte division was to drive the Soviet troops out of the territories northwest of Radomyshl and break through the Soviet defense line in the front between the villages of Mokrenshchina and Pekarshchina. This would open the way for the XIII Panzer Corps to Ra DOMISHL.

Preparations for the offensive began immediately on December 5, 1943. At 15 o'clock the "tigers" left in the direction of their original positions. At 20:00 they took up positions in the village of Silyanshchina. The reconnaissance carried out by the forces of the armored personnel carrier battalion showed that in Pekarshchina the Soviet troops were seriously prepared for defense. Defensive fortifications went far to the west. The difficult terrain made it impossible for the German tanks to outflank the village. In addition, before attacking the village, it was necessary to capture the bridge, which was able to withstand vehicles with a load of more than 50 tons. Peiper decided to attack the positions near the bridge in the evening with several armored personnel carriers with grenadiers. This bold venture ended in success. Despite

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powerful Soviet fire, armored personnel carriers broke into the bridge, after which the grenadiers, supported by tanks, were able to drive the Red Army soldiers out of the village. During this swift charge, the German armored personnel carriers virtually ignored the fire of Soviet anti-tank guns and armor-piercing rifles. During this sortie, the commander of the battalion, SS Hauptsturmführer Gul, was seriously wounded. A shell fragment hit him in the face. Goul survived, but lost his eye. At the same time, Peiper kept the Tigers in reserve as his main trump card on the offensive. They were thrown into battle at dawn on 6 December. When it was time to advance, it turned out that not all tanks immediately started the engine. When, nevertheless, they all rushed to the attack, it turned out that a powerful Soviet anti-tank front was spread out right in front of them. In order not to become an excellent target for the Soviet artillerymen, Kling's company had to perform a complex maneuver on the move. Only after that it was possible to return fire on the anti-tank guns. Wittmann's crew played the main role in breaking through this Soviet defensive line. He was able to destroy several Soviet guns on the move, as a result of which a decent "gap" was formed in the anti-tank front.

At 6 o'clock in the morning, Peiper was already in Andreev, where the battle for the Zhitomir-Korosten highway was unfolding. In that battle, Untersturmführer Kalinowski's "tiger" was hit by several shells. The tank caught fire, but the driver-mechanic, SS navigator Bingert, was able to bring down the fire. Peiper gave the order to continue the offensive. To the east of Andreev, the forces of his battle group destroyed several Soviet artillery batteries. After the anti-tank line was finally broken, at [0000 hours] Peiper's battle group took up positions on the heights on both sides of Styrt.

The tactical goal set on the first day of the offensive was achieved. But Piper is  
obviously not

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suited. He continued to advance in an easterly direction. During this attack, German tanks destroyed several more anti-tank lines and fortifications. During this breakthrough, the crew of the Wittmann tank knocked out three more T-34s. It happened in the vicinity of the village of Torchin. Such a rapid offensive by the Peiper strike group turned out to be very deplorable for the Red Army. During this "tank expedition", the command posts of four Soviet rifle divisions were captured. In addition, sixty-seven Soviet anti-tank guns were knocked out and two batteries of field artillery were completely destroyed.

On December 7, 1943, at 12:30, Kling's heavy tank company rushed towards Chaikovka, where it was supposed to support the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. Despite the appearance of the "tigers", the offensive in this direction bogged down. WITH



At nightfall, Peiper's battle group tried to bypass Chaikovka from the north and attack the village of Khodory from the northeast. Heavy street fighting ensued. They subsided only by the morning of December 8. After that, German tanks captured the village of Zabolot, located just north of Radomyshl. To summarize this operation, the bold sortie of the Pai Pera combat group was able to prevent the consolidation of Soviet troops on the bridgehead along the banks of the Teterev River. For this operation, on January 27, 1944, Peiper was awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross.

#### Chapter 6 ON THE WAY TO THE CHERKASSK KOTL

During the battles described above, Kling's company lost only one Tiger. In addition, during the continuous battle, Wittmann further strengthened his authority in the company. During clashes, he remained cold, reasonable, never lost control of the situation. He was confident in himself even in the most difficult and critical situations. He was not familiar with the fear inherent in many tankers before an offensive at night. His very behavior inspired calmness and confidence throughout the crew. Warmbrunn wrote about this: "When Wittmann was next to us, not a single task seemed difficult or dangerous. With him we had to succeed in his execution. And we did it successfully."

But this is a very simplistic view of the reasons for Wittmann's tactical successes. He was not some kind of magician or conjurer. In addition to the fact that he carefully thought through and prepared for each attack, he was able to instantly assess the changed situation and make the only right decision in the new conditions. As eyewitnesses noted, his brain worked at 100%. When he considered it necessary, he himself conducted reconnaissance before the offensive. If it was impossible to use the tank, then he went to the position on foot. Often it was on the results of such intelligence that the

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tactics of effective actions of all "tigers". His tactical skill, coupled with great personal dynamism, was the key to our success. Wittmann was more than just a daredevil. All his actions were calculated, he never relied on chance. This confidence and methodicalness in actions was transferred to his people.

All this information is corroborated by Walter Lau, who recalled that on the eve of an offensive, Wittmann "almost always took the tank to the top of the hill in order to get a better look at the enemy's positions and then give the appropriate orders to his platoon." "During the attack, his tank always went ahead. He used not so much his instincts, his tactical sense, as personal skills and combat experience. He had an exceptional ability to instantly assess the disposition of enemy forces, after which he used the landscape to his own advantage. All these abilities harmoniously complemented each other in him, which ultimately led to success. Of course, at a critical moment, his legendary fearlessness and endurance came into play. Somewhere since that time!, and maybe a little earlier in our company, he was an indisputable authority, a kind of ideal, a role model".

During the winter battles of 1943 in Ukraine, Wittmann very quickly replenished his "battle account". Almost every day, his crew knocked out a Soviet tank or destroyed a gun. The use of special optics installed on his tank made it possible to disassemble all potential targets at a distance of 800 meters. But only the skills of Wittmann were not enough for such an amazing success of the crew. Accurate hitting the target also largely depended on the skill of the gunner Balthazar Woll, who was no less a professional than his legendary commander. In general, eki

1 November - early December 1943.

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Wittmann's page was a master of his military art. So, for example, one of the propaganda notes said: "In the battle near Brusilov, Wittmann unexpectedly ran into a Soviet tank unit, which was preparing to attack German positions. The appearance of the "tiger" took the Soviet tankers by surprise. Taking advantage of this delay, the crew of the "Tiger" was able to hit ten T-34s in the total tank mass within a few minutes. Three more Soviet tanks from this unit were knocked out on the same day in the next battle. Wittmann counted every destroyed tank, but he considered the Soviet anti-tank gun much more dangerous, and therefore he kept a special account of them. In Soviet camouflaged artillery nests, he saw a real "habitat of death." And therefore, with undisguised pleasure, I was engaged in their preliminary identification. On December 6, 1943, Wittmann's crew managed to break through the most powerful Soviet anti-tank line. This case once again speaks of his skill. His skills predetermined the outcome of this battle. Wittmann fought his way through the fierce artillery fire and burst into the Soviet positions like a wolf into a herd of sheep. He transferred the hurricane of his fire to the road, on which he began to systematically shoot the Soviet transport convoy, turning it into piles of smoking pieces of iron. Panic arose among the Soviet troops. By this time, Michael Wittmann was one of the veteran commanders of tank crews. His instincts, his intuition told him what to do. It was said that he saw as well at night as during the day. In the dark, he himself aimed the tank gun at the target. Only then did the flashes of the shot indicate to the rest that the enemy tank was exactly where the shot was fired. Now Wittmann destroys an enemy tank almost every day, but usually there are several of them. The list of his combat victories is continuously growing longer and longer.

This note by a German war correspondent depicts Wittmann as almost a kind of superman.

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However, it did not say a word about his real human qualities. In fact, he was an example for many tankers. He never demanded combat results and exploits from his colleagues as some kind of personal duty. Despite his astonishing successes, he never put himself above others. Rolf Schamp, who served with him for almost a year, recalled during these days of the war: "I ended up in Wittmann's platoon in Weimar in November 1942. Then he was only an SS Oberscharführer. I remember very well our first meeting, which took place in the barracks building. My first impression of him is that he is a very nice person. The general good impression was supplemented and intensified by his pleasant voice, clear, not too loud, quite sympathetic. He had a hint of a light Bavarian accent. His gaze was friendly. Later, when I was in his platoon, he more than once addressed me in a friendly way. I never left the feeling that he cared for us both as people and as soldiers. For many months, both during training and during my stay in his platoon, not a single incident occurred that could change my attitude towards him. On the contrary, my first favorable impression was constantly reinforced. Now for me Wittmann as a person and as a soldier is a role model. It seems incredible, but in my memory I cannot find one hint of "weakness" that would apply to Wittmann. He was extremely polite, correct and humane in his attitude towards his subordinates and colleagues. He never raised his voice. He was distinguished by modesty, as well as absolute indifference to alcohol and amorous adventures. In dealing with strangers, he was rather shy, which once again characterized him as a good person. Apart from that, I can't recall a single case when during the preparation for an operation he behaved recklessly or imprudently, decided to rely on chance. He tried to always be fair, but he could not put up with careless

ness in business".

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On December 9, 1943, the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment launched an attack on Radomyshl. The rapid German advance was halted by Soviet troops about two kilometers northwest of the city. The Leibstandarte was forced

stop the attack. At the division headquarters, it was immediately decided to regroup forces and launch a massive offensive southeast of the village of Medeleвка, which should have made it possible to bypass the bridgehead held by the Red Army units from the north. But in order to carry out this plan, the German troops first had to capture the village of Mezhirechka. At that time, Hauptsturmführer Kling had four Tigers at his disposal. Another ten cars were under repair. Actually, there was no need to talk about the Leibstandarte tank regiment at that moment. The regiment in size was more like a tank company - it consisted of six "panthers" and eight tanks of the RU type. These figures clearly show the results of the continuous "plugging holes" in the front by the forces of the Leibstandarte. Despite the fierce resistance of the Red Army, around 19 hours 30 minutes Mezhirechka was captured by the Germans. The next target was Teterev. Wittmann was about to attack the Soviet tanks near this settlement with the help of three "tigers", when suddenly about twenty T-34s appeared from a well-camouflaged shelter, which immediately opened fire on the Germans. From the first minutes of the battle, it became clear that the idea of a talented tanker had failed. As a result, I had to accept an unequal battle. In this situation, a lot depended on the skill of the loaders, since it was the speed of firing that was the key to success in such collisions. The "tigers" had one advantage - their aimers could not actually aim when they sent shell after shell into the dense wedge of Soviet tanks. During this battle, the crew of Michael Wittmann was

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Jürgen Brandt and Lotsch

six tanks destroyed. The rest of the crews have a more modest score, but this was quite enough to force the fairly thinned ranks of the G-34 to retreat.

During the battle near Mezhirechka, the "tiger" of SS Untersturmführer Kalinowski was hit several times. The tank commander himself was wounded in the face and right arm. Other crew members were also slightly injured. Around 22:00, the "tigers" attacked the village of Malaya Racha, which was located somewhat west of the Teterev River. Here a powerful line of anti-tank defense awaited them. While the tanks were waging a protracted evening battle, units of the 68th German Infantry Regiment broke into the outskirts of Radomyshl.

One of Hauptsturmführer Kling's crew recalled this battle, which was very typical in its style for all operations commanded by Peiper: "After the "Tank" Mayer, Sturmbannführer Johann Peiper was, without a doubt, one of the most courageous commanders" Leibstandarte". We, the tankers of the "Tigers", were proud and glad when, after the death of Obersturmbannführer

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Schoenberger, the command of the tank regiment was entrusted to Peiper. As commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, he was one of those officers with whom you feel safe even in the most risky alterations. In December 1943, in the area of Radomyshl, a tank group consisting of four or five "tigers", several assault guns and RG tanks, many armored personnel carriers and amphibious vehicles, ended up on the highway. Actually, it was difficult to call it a highway - it was a road that could be driven without problems in the summer heat, but snow and Dodge's turned it into a continuous swamp. It turned out to be the assembly point for the shock group commanded by Sturmbannführer Peiper. The advance detachment of this group consisted of a pair of "tigers", which were subordinate to SS Untersturmführer Wendorf. They were accompanied by a whole cavalcade of armored personnel carriers from the reconnaissance battalion. We passed the wooded area and went twenty kilometers deep into the enemy position. We made a raid on the Soviet rear. By the evening of the second day, we again reached the German positions. During this entire operation, I was in charge of the tank crew commanded by Hauptsturmführer Kling. It was interesting for me to fight under him, it was a kind of gift of fate. We were located approximately in the center

the battle group, which, according to the order, moved in scattered order directly in front of Peiper's half-tracked armored vehicle. More than once I managed to see Piper, who was sitting on the buffer of the car with a machine gun at the ready. Then Piper gave a lot of orders. We were unspeakably lucky, as almost all forest roads were mined. Mines were wooden boxes, very reminiscent of fish boxes, which were stuffed with yellow explosives. All of them were well camouflaged. In any case, in those two days, three of the "tigers" ran into them, but only miraculously they did not receive serious injuries. But still they had to be left in the forest. For their protection was left

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an armored personnel carrier with five or six panzergrenadiers. I was doubly lucky that I did not stay behind the front line at a distance of twenty kilometers from our positions. We nervously waited to see what would happen in the evening when it got dark. Piper, in typical manner, gave the order: "Install hedgehogs and wire fences." As a result, the battle group was distributed in a circle of diameters of one hundred meters. In its center was Peiper's car and Kling's tank. Next to them stood the tank of Unterscharführer Mölli. Normally, in such a situation, the soldiers would be nervous and worried. However, Piper and Kling, who were among us, exuded confidence and calmness. As a result, we were not even bothered by skirmishes with Soviet patrols that lasted all night. It is possible that the Soviet units were confused and did not know where the front lines were now and where the rear was. Later, SS navigator Wenzel, who was loading one of the tanks damaged by mines, told how they went into a Russian hut to find something to eat. In the house they found a Russian soldier, who apparently came here for the same reason. Frightened, the Soviet soldier landed all the ammunition in a disorderly firing at almost unarmed tankers, and then ran away in panic. By noon on the second day of the raid, we had to break through to our own, striking at the Soviet positions from the rear. As far as I remember, at that time only one of Kling's "tigers" could be used in the attack.

On December 10, 1943, the tank group tried to break through in a southerly direction. The attack, which began at 8 o'clock in the morning, had to be curtailed as a matter of urgency. The fact is that the attack from the rear did not come as a "surprise" for the Soviet units. Near the village of Krasnoborki, Peiper's group came under aimed fire from Soviet heavy anti-tank guns. The Germans were forced to withdraw. It was decided to spend the rest of the day preparing for the next breakthrough. A second attack on Krasnoborki was scheduled for the next day. At the same time it had to

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abandon the tactics of a decisive raid, which Piper often resorted to. Michael Wittmann and her several tank commanders carefully planned the operation for several hours. Every tactical move was practiced. Wittmann himself did not intend to rely on chance. The attack was to take place across a fairly open and wide plain. Tanks acted as a breakthrough, striking force. They were supposed to be supported by fire from German assault guns from a certain distance. Grenadier units were supposed to be the link. At the same time, the forces of the SS division "Leibstandarte" began to concentrate northeast of Mezhirechka. At 4 am on December 11, 1943, preparations began for another attack. The 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, together with a battalion of assault guns and a group of "tigers", were to launch an offensive along this entire sector of the front. After artillery preparation around 12 o'clock, the German armored vehicles moved to fairly well fortified Krasnoborki. Supported by the fire of assault guns, the tip of the tank wedge was able to penetrate the eastern outskirts of Krasnoborki. Street fighting began here, which gradually spread to the nearby village of Velikaya Racha. As a result, the Tigers, having destroyed several anti-tank guns, managed to gain a foothold on Hill 170, which was adjacent to Racha. "Tiger" Kalinowski was once again hit, and his commander himself was once again wounded in the face. At 4:50 p.m., German troops were able to capture the village of Velikaya Racha, after which they moved in the direction of the village of Chudin, which was actually located on the banks of the Teterev River. The Germans failed to take the settlement on the move. Anticipating another violent

offensive, on December 12, 1943, the Soviet units left Chudin and retreated to the west, where they entrenched themselves in the forests near the village of Glukhov. For a while

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there was a break. On December 12 and 13, the "tigers" did not take part in the battles - they had to be prepared for a new attack.

The German offensive north of the Irsha River began on December 14, 1943. Simultaneously with the German offensive, the Soviet units attacked the positions of the XXXXIII (48th) tank corps in several sectors of the front. It happened on the segment between the rivers Irsha and Teterev. In case of success of their operation, the Soviet command not only covered the Kiev-Korosten railway line, but also gained time to bring up reserves. As a result, the Leibstandarte again had to perform the function of a "fire brigade". This SS division was supposed to stop the Soviet advance at Irsha. The "Tigers" went on the march on December 14 at 11:30. They, at the head of a tank regiment of the 1st SS division, moved along the Veprin-Fedorovka road. But a kilometer before Fedorovka, at a fork in the road, German tanks were waiting for T-34s and Soviet anti-tank guns. "Gigram" managed to break through the fire of the guns. A tank battle ensued. As a result, three T-34s were shot down (one of them was credited to the "account" of Untersturmführer Wendorff). But at the same time, the Germans themselves lost two tanks. The SS tank regiment continued its advance to the northeast, a few kilometers later they were stopped near Vyrova. From the headquarters of the division received an order to withdraw at nightfall back to the south. As a result, the "tigers" ended up in Zabolotye, which was located just west of Krasnoborki. As a result, the front line ran just between these villages. Krasnoborki and Malaya Racha were in the hands of the Soviet troops, Zabolot was held by the Germans. At the same time, the Leibstandarte, on the whole, fulfilled the task assigned to it - the SS men were able to stop the rapid advance to the south-west of the 16th Soviet Army. As a result, the Soviet command had to postpone the start of a general offensive in Ukraine. Himself

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The Leibstandarte continued to be a "fire brigade", whose striking force was the "legendary" company of heavy tanks under the command of Kling.

On December 17, 1943, some personnel changes took place in the company. In particular, Rolf Champ left her. He was first sent to the SS sergeant's school in Lauenburg, from where he immediately got into officer courses. He was followed by several more non-commissioned officers of the SS. The company had to be abandoned by Oberscharführer Jurgen, "Captain" Brand and Franz Staudegger. They were sent to Fallingbistel, where they were to organize special courses for SS tank junkers. Among those who left was the driver-mechanic from the crew of Michael Wittmann - Siegfried Fuss.

But this did not mean at all that the Leibstandarte ceased to take part in hostilities. For almost two consecutive nights, the Leibstandarte moved north unnoticed under the cover of darkness to reach the outskirts of the village of Meleni. On December 19, 1943, the 1st SS Panzer Division was again ready to attack. By that time, under the command of Kling there were seven serviceable tanks. The tank regiment itself consisted of twelve RU ("panther") tanks and thirty-three RU tanks. The tanks set out to the north at 10:50, moving in tight march formation. Another battle took place in the local complex landscape. The Soviet troops were quite surprised when they were attacked by German tanks - their appearance in the area was by no means expected. By 13:20, the Red Army units were driven out from the second defensive line near the village of Meleni. Some time later, German vehicles reached the Balarka farm. As a result, Soviet tanks and infantry were forced to temporarily retreat towards the village of Stremigorod. During the short-lived battle, the "tigers" knocked out one T-34 and several anti-tank guns. Command XXXXIII Panzer Corps

confirmed in its report that the Soviet troops were defeated by the Leibstandarte units on the Chopovichi front! — Meleni, as a result of which the threat of encirclement loomed over them.

The chief of staff of the tank corps, Colonel von Mellenthin, noted that it was possible to continue the operation with the forces of the "two best tank formations" - the 1st Panzer Division and the 1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte". On the night of December 20, 1943, the Tigers were withdrawn behind the positions of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. At 13:45, German panzergrenadiers attacked the Chopovichi railway station. Together with the combat group of Lieutenant Bradel (1st Panzer Division), the SS tankers succeeded in occupying the approaches to the station. Once again, the Tigers played a major role in German tactical success. They were able to break through the Soviet positions, thus paving the way for the battle group. During this battle, the crew of Hauptsturmführer Kling knocked out their 46th tank.

In the evening, panzergrenadiers from the 2nd battalion of the 2nd regiment of the "Leibstandarte" fought street battles in the western part of Chopovichi. The battle was very fierce and bloody. Unable to participate in it, the "tigers" and other tanks of the "Leibstandarte" held the railway line and a very important transport arrow.

If we talk about the total Soviet losses during this battle, they turned out to be very large. The Red Army lost seventeen T-34 tanks, four self-propelled artillery mounts and forty-four guns. By this time, the Leibstandarte tankers had destroyed a total of 1,002 Soviet tanks in 1943. Moreover, this figure did not include armored vehicles and armored personnel carriers.

ÿ In the documents of the 1940s, there is often a slightly different spelling of this settlement, now the city - Chepovichi.

On December 21, 1943, Soviet troops launched a powerful counterattack from the direction of the village of Yosipovka. The task of repelling it was entrusted to the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment "Leibstandarte". With six tanks at their disposal, the Germans were able, while on the defensive, to knock out twenty-one Soviet tanks. The rest of the "Leibstandarte" continued to fight in Chopovichi. The main strategic task for the 1st SS Panzer Division was to prevent the development of the Soviet offensive in the direction of Zhitomir. And again, the "tigers" became the "backbone" in repelling the Soviet counteroffensive. As a result, twenty-three T-34s and two anti-tank guns became their "victims". At about 6 p.m., the Germans had only two usable "tigers" left. Together with four "Panthers" and six RU tanks, they made up the entire tank regiment of the "Leibstandarte", which was commanded by Peiper. On the night of December 22, 1943, the remnants of the Leibstandarte division received reinforcements in the form of units of the 1st Panzer Division. Together they had to hold Chopovichi. The situation was affected by the fact that in the end the German offensive on Meleni did not succeed. The desired results for the German command were not achieved. Despite heavy losses, the Soviet troops did not stop trying to counterattack.

The crews of several German tanks, tired from many days of fighting, settled down to spend the night in one of the houses. Walter Lau recalled this period of the Ukrainian winter of 1943: "In the summer, it was generally accepted to sleep in tents or right under the open sky. The fact is that Russian huts were full of fleas and lice. To that. in the summer, the lice did not particularly bother us, since we always had the opportunity to wash ourselves. However, with the onset of winter, the huts began to be in demand. Whenever the situation allowed, we climbed into the house for several hours to warm up at least a little. Often in the building

In our research, we found soldiers from other units and other branches of the military. It will not be an exaggeration if I say that under an icy wind at a temperature of 30 degrees below zero, up to twenty people found shelter in a small room of 15 square meters. Sometimes, even in the evening, we united with two or three crews of our platoon. In those days, our routine was as follows: refueling, filling machine-gun belts with cartridges, cleaning cylinder heads with water and antifreeze. After that it was time for supper, which usually consisted of chicken and a few potatoes. If the front line was held by our panzergrenadiers, then we were located behind them at a distance of 500-1000 meters. In such situations, we were given time to heat the water, wash ourselves and put on the clean uniform that each of us had in stock. But if the position was instructed to hold by Wehrmacht units, then we did not even dare to take off our boots and unfasten our belt. There was only one thing that attracted us then: sleep and more sleep}

On December 23, 1943, it was decided to create a special strike group based on the remnants of the Leibstandarte tank regiment, which was supposed to consist of three Tigers, seven Panthers and sixteen P7 tanks [1], which were reinforced by units SS reconnaissance battalion. But in fact, there was almost no talk of active actions. The 1st SS Panzer Division went on the defensive. The strike group itself was used only in emergencies. So, for example, when the Soviet troops broke through the positions of the 291st Infantry Regiment, the tanks were thrown in to close this gap in the front line.

If we talk about Michael Wittmann, then by the end of 1943, his fame had spread far beyond the scope of tank units. It so happened that senior SS officers called him to ask for advice when planning the next operation. In some cases, he

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vehemently opposed the proposed plans. In one case, with his skills during reconnaissance, he revealed the concentration of Soviet tanks in one of the directions. As a result, he resolutely rejected any proposals to undertake a frontal attack. His opinion was eventually heeded by the Soviet tank group Kurt Kleber, Michael Wittmann was attacked from the flank and Bobby Woll from the rear. often happened

so that Wittmann informally gave orders to the commanders of other companies, that is, functionally performing the tasks assigned to the battalion commander.

On December 24, 1943, the entire tanks of the Leibstandarte and the 1st Panzer Division at their disposal were already a little away from the village of Sobolevka. At 10 o'clock Colonel Mellenthin's battle group, consisting of the 1st Tank Battalion, the 113th Panzergrenadier Regiment and twenty-five tanks of the 1st SS Panzer Division, attacked the Shatrishche station. The offensive of the German tanks was swift and unexpected, as a result of which the Soviet troops began to suffer heavy losses. But by evening, the command of the tank corps received information that the Soviet troops launched a large-scale offensive east of Zhitomir, and the tip of the Soviet wedge was directed to Kocherovo.

Almost instantly, units of the XXXXIII Panzer Corps, the Leibstandarte and the 1st Panzer Division had to leave their past positions and move somewhat south of Zhytomyr. Not without compulsion

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money losses. Kling gave the order to blow up eight "tigers" near Chopovichi, for the repair of which there was no time, and transportation was not possible.

As a result, the withdrawal of German units on December 24 was more like a stampede. At the same time, the Leibstandarte, weakened in battles that did not stop for a day, was again sent to the "critical sector of the front." For a month of fighting, units of the 1st SS Panzer Division managed to achieve significant tactical success. They stopped the Soviet offensive near Bru-

force, a breakthrough of the German line of defense near Radomyshl was prevented, etc. But this could not change the strategic situation as a whole. Now the Leibstandarte had to once again try to improve the situation at the front.

On December 25, 1943, the Leibstandarte marched through Zhitomir. Kling's GIGRS were stationed in the village of Ivankov, which was located just southeast of the city. On December 26, the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment captured the village of Volitsa Zarubinskaya, while the 1st Battalion, having taken the village of Stepok, continued to move further east. A little further south, the forces of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment captured the village of Gardyshevka. But the German success did not last long. During a swift counterattack, Soviet troops were able to recapture Stepok. As a result, the Leibstandarte was entrusted with a new task. The SS division was supposed to advance along the line: Moshkovtsy - Andrushevka - Staroselye. But the offensive turned out to be a failure. Having suffered huge losses, the tank regiment of the "Leibstandarte" could not even enter the outskirts of the well-defended Andrushevka. In addition, the Soviet troops were able to develop their counteroffensive, during which Gardyshevka was recaptured from the Germans.

December 27-28, 1943 became a kind of finest hour for SS Untersturmführer Helmut Wendorff. Later in the presentation to the Knight's Cross, which

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was signed by Peiper, the following was reported: "In the morning hours of December 27, 1943, Untersturmführer Wendorf, stationed with four tanks from his platoon in Ivankovo, received the task of intercepting and destroying the advanced Soviet tank detachments that were moving along the forest north of the highway. This was supposed to allow the division to regroup its forces during the night south of the Guiva villages. During numerous attacks on the tip of the tank wedge, Untersturmführer Wendorf showed exceptional courage and courage. At a crossroads near Ivankov, he set up an ambush. After his crew destroyed two T-34s, which were allowed within accurate range, Wendorf went to the area of the village of Chubarovka, where he was supposed to attack the Soviet tank group. Having made a bold dash along the railway line, he entered the village from the northeast, where he destroyed 11 T-34s. After completing this mission, he was sent against enemy tanks that were retreating from the village of Yosipovka. There they knocked out three more tanks. During the day, the enemy was able to break into Staroselye and captured all the nearby bridges. The only way for the heavy weapons of the division to retreat was the way to Ivankov. Attacking with several tank spearheads, the Ivans tried to cut this road in several places, threatening to encircle the division in the area of the village of Staraya Kotelnaya and the village of Volosov. Untersturmführer Wendorff and the three "Tigers" at his disposal stopped this offensive, allowing the artillery battalion and the armored personnel carrier battalion to withdraw. After that, it even became possible to withdraw some of our damaged tanks to the rear. Wendorf was the last to leave the area. Around midnight, he, along with all three tanks, arrived safely on the southern outskirts of Guiva.

On December 28, 1943, powerful enemy tank groups under cover were able to advance to the Anto line.

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pol - Boyarka, after which they entered these settlements. With the forces of four "Tigers", some of which were hardly suitable for combat operations, Untersturmführer Wendorf, on his own initiative, rushed towards the enemy tanks. In the ensuing battle, eleven T-34s were destroyed, which prevented the enemy from attacking the division's flank. Wendorf continued his victorious actions during December 27-28. During these two days, they destroyed ten T-34s, increasing the total number of enemy tanks knocked out by them to fifty-eight pieces.



In just a couple of days, "Bubi" Wendorf, along with Michael Wittmann, became one of the most successful tank commanders of the "Leibstandarte". But soon Wendorf, whom Wittmann always called by the little-known nickname "Axel", left the front line. He was instructed to conduct preparatory courses for the sergeants of the SS tank units.

If we talk about German losses during these battles, then the situation looked very disappointing (for the command of the XXXIII tank corps). The 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment "Leibstandarte" (commander Obersturmbannführer Frey) consisted of 442 people (14 officers, 49 non-commissioned officers, 379 soldiers). The 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment of Obersturmbannführer Kraas had even less. Its personnel consisted of 281 people (11 officers, 21 non-commissioned officers, 249 soldiers). Kling's company consisted of four combat-ready Tigers, while the tank regiment of the Leibstandarte had only eight Panthers and seventeen R21U tanks.

On December 29, 1943, Soviet troops continued to attack German positions along the Antopol-Boyarka line. The defense was entrusted to two battalions of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. At 9 o'clock in the morning, about forty T-34s rushed towards the German grenadiers. Battery of assault guns, aimed fire could

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destroy twelve Soviet tanks. Seeing the critical situation, "tigers" were sent in this direction. One of them was forced to leave the battlefield. After its crew destroyed eight tanks, the vehicle was so mangled from Soviet shells that it could not continue to fight. The German forces were clearly not enough not only to repel the Soviet offensive, but at least to delay it. By nightfall, Soviet tanks entered Guyva. From these positions, they could deliver a powerful blow to the flank of the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment, which was located in Volosovo. Not only the orderlies and signalers had to join the battle, but also the commander of the regiment, Obersturmbannführer Kraas. Armed with a machine gun, he was among his grenadiers. With the onset of darkness, the remnants of the regiment, as well as the entire Leibstandarte, retreated west to the villages of Solotvin and Kodnya, which stood on the banks of the Kodnyanka River.

The Leibstandarte's neighbor along the front line was the 1st Panzer Division, located just to the south. She occupied positions northeast of Berdichev. Now the "Leibstandarte" was given yet another "heroic" task. His tank group (it could not be called a regiment under any circumstances) was supposed to attack the Soviet units along the Berdichev Zhitomir highway. The result of this sortie was to be the establishment of communication with the XIII army corps, which occupied positions to the south and north of Zhitomir. During this attack, two "tigers" were destroyed by units of the Red Army. At the same time, the Leibstandarte itself had to fight fierce defensive battles. At least one fact speaks of their bloodshed - in one day, fifty-nine T-34s were destroyed by the Germans. As a result, this event was even mentioned in the daily report of the Wehrmacht: "1st SS Panzer Division "SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler" under the command of SS Oberführer Wisch in fierce battles again

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demonstrated the resilience of her fighting spirit." But in fact, for the Germans, things were not so bravura.

On December 30, Soviet troops continued their offensive on a broad front. Now the Leibstandarte could only defend itself with varying success. Only two "tigers" remained in the entire division. Ironically, it was on this day that Kling was awarded the German Cross in Gold. The commander of a heavy tank company was one of the first tankers to be awarded this one of the highest awards of the Third Reich. For a variety of reasons, war veterans treated this award somewhat dismissively, calling it "fried eggs". Huge losses in the officer corps led to the fact that at that moment Kling was already

commanded the 2nd Battalion of the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment. The command of the remnants of the heavy tank company was entrusted, as might be expected, to Michael Wittmann. However, this did not prevent Kling himself from showing a non-official interest in his former unit. If possible, he tried to be present during the planning of all combat operations in which Wittmann's tankers were to take part. But unlike Wittmann and Wendorf, Kling, although a good soldier, had no live contact with his subordinates and ordinary soldiers.

The last day of 1943 was marked by intensified attacks by Red Army units. As a result, the Leibstandarte had to surrender its former positions and withdraw to the northern quarters of Berdichev. There the SS men were to hold the line Katerinivka - Gvozdava - Troyanov. The new defensive line was occupied by units of the SS division right on New Year's Eve, and at 9:45 another Soviet attack followed. In Troyanovo, to strengthen the defense, one of the "tigers" was left, commanded by Untersturmführer Helmut Wendorff. During the morning Soviet attack

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ki he managed to knock out five T-34s. It turned out that this was the last serviceable "tiger" of the Leibstandarte. The rest of the tanks were under repair in the town of Pyatki. In this regard, an interesting story emerged. We are talking about the missing Untersturmführer Hartel. There are two versions of his disappearance. According to one, he left by plane for Berlin, where he never arrived. According to another, he did not return from vacation. What really happened to him, no one knows.

On January 2, 1944, the Leibstandarte again changed its positions. This time the repair of the damaged "tigers" was carried out in the village of Starokonstantinovo, which at the same time

was also the location of a field hospital.

Formally, there were twelve Tigers under Wittmann's command, and four more vehicles were destroyed during the retreat. The Leibstandarte units more or less successfully repulsed the attack launched by the Soviet troops on January 3, 1944. But the situation for the Germans was getting worse and worse every day. They were almost constantly under heavy artillery fire. To simplify the coordination of actions on the same day, January 3, 1944, the remnants of the Leibstandarte were transferred to the operational command of the KhPI Army Corps. But this could hardly change the situation radically - every day the SS division retreated further and further south. This was done in a hurry, without proper preparation. There is at least one example of this. When the headquarters of the "Leibstandarte" asked the command of the army corps where to get fuel for the tanks, the answer was: "Take it from the ground." The enraged SS Obersturmbannführer Lehmann gritted: "Our 'tigers' and 'panthers' are not

eat hay"

The fighting continued on 5 January. Now the task of the "Leib standard" was to prevent units of Kras

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Noah Army move forward too rapidly, cutting off the divisions of the retreat. At that moment, the 1st SS Panzer Division again became subordinate to the command of XXXXIII Panzer Corps. The retreat continued. The division took up positions near the villages of Demchin and Rachki. On January 6, 1944, she was supposed to take part in the attack on the village of Velikie Korovintsy. But the offensive failed, the Soviet troops delivered a pre-emptive strike and were able to quickly gain a foothold in this village. Developing their offensive, units of the Red Army attacked the Germans in Rachki. The Leibstandarte again retreated - the positions were transferred to Buraki and Dubrovka. All the "tigers" that could be thrown into battle were concentrated in the village of Smela. But the plans of the Germans were once again "corrected" by the Red Army. On January 9, at 05:15, units of the 54th Soviet tank brigade, sweeping away the German defensive

line, launched an offensive between the settlements of Stepok and Zhrebki. Michael Wittmann and his Tigers were alerted. They were immediately sent to the area of the village of Zhrebki. In order to intercept the Soviet tanks in time, Wittmann's company had to go at full speed without sparing fuel. Wittmann himself carefully examined the surrounding landscapes in the darkness. He did not have time to prepare for the operation, so the plan had to be developed on the go. By the way, in the previous few weeks of fighting, Wittmann, with the help of his gunner Balthazar Woll, knocked out fifty-six tanks, becoming the most successful German tank commander.

Wittmann gave orders in his calm, unruffled voice. Woll was ready at any moment to fire an armor-piercing projectile. Everyone was staring intently into the morning twilight. The sound of the battle, the explosions of shells and the crackle of machine guns told the German tankers that the Soviet troops were somewhere very close. Suddenly, Wittmann spotted the first T-34.

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By comms, he relayed Woll's location. The gunner turned the turret and sent an 88 mm projectile in the indicated direction. Soviet tankers also noticed the Germans and began to prepare to open fire. In this situation, even seconds mattered. A direct hit on the T-34 tore off his turret. Now Wittmann saw a lot of tanks, and the targets had to be chosen according to the situation. During the battle, Wittmann's crew knocked out three Soviet tanks and one self-propelled artillery mount.

The suddenness of the German tank attack and the aggressiveness of their maneuver stopped the Soviet advance. The Soviet tank group was caught in the pincers of the Leibstandarte tanks, almost all of it was destroyed. During this battle, which ended by 9 a.m., tankers of the 1st SS division knocked out thirty-three T-34s and seven self-propelled guns. For some time, the Soviet breakthrough was stalled. Now for Wittmann's company, the main defensive line was three kilometers north of the village of Zhrebki. All subsequent attempts by the Red Army units to carry out counterattacks in this direction were unsuccessful. The Leibstandarte's daily report reported the 60th tank knocked out by Michael Wittmann. The command of the XXXXXX Panzer Corps, commanded by General of the Panzer Troops Balck, thanked Peiper and Wittmann.

It was during these winter days of 1943 that the star of Michael Wittmann rose. From a talented tanker during the fighting in Ukraine, he turned into the best specialist in tank battle tactics. For many, his experience and natural instinct seemed to be the key to the success of any, even the most hopeless operation. Bobby Warmbrunn recalled on this occasion: "As for Michael Wittmann, we can say that he became the most significant figure in the entire 13th Panzer Company. He was well aware of this and rightly proud of it.

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The most famous photo of Michael Wittmann

Michael Wittmann spent the entire evening of January 8, 1944 preparing for the next operation. "Tigers" were filled with fuel, brought ammunition. Many noted Wittmann's special habit, he went to bed only after all the cases were finished, but in the morning he looked fresh and not at all tired. Several boards served as a bed for him. At the same time, he did not prohibit, but did not encourage the feasts, which from time to time still took place in the company.

Early in the morning on January 9, 1944, it became known that another Soviet tank unit was approaching. Wittmann was the first to rush into battle. In just over an hour, he knocked out six T-34s one after the other. His risky counterattack again stopped the advance of the Red Army on this sector of the front. But in the evening the order came - the Leibstandarte was retreating.

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Michael Wittmann and Balthasar Woll

His positions were again transferred to the south. They passed along the Petrikovtsy-Smela line. At the village of Bespechnaya, the Leibstandarte was supposed to close its positions with the SS Reich division.

The new line of German defense was built on January 10, 1944. There was some calm. The fact is that not the strongest Soviet infantry units turned out to be opposite the panzergrenadier regiments of the Leibstandarte. As if taking advantage of a respite in the fighting, the Leibstandarte command sent a performance from the village of Morozovka to award Michael Wittmann the Knight's Cross.

On January 11, 1944, four Tigers were ready to go into battle. They were to be supported by eight Panthers and eight R21Us. The battle began quite unexpectedly for the Germans. On the morning of January 12, tank units of the Red Army, having broken through the German line of defense, moved forward to the village of Ulanov, where the blockade

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whether the supply line of the Leibstandarte division. Action had to be taken urgently. At that time, not far from this place were two "tigers" that had just come out of repair. In an emergency order, two crews rushed towards them (the transfer of tanks from the front line would have taken much more time). One of them was the crew of Michael Wittmann, and the second crew was led by Oberscharführer Lötsch. Having launched a swift counterattack, the German tankers were able to knock out three Soviet tanks and damage two more T-34s. The rest of the equipment was destroyed by the 473rd battalion of tank destroyers, which arrived in time to help Wittmann. Wittmann departed back to his positions. The tankers did not have long to rest. On January 13, at 8:30, the Red Army units attacked the positions of the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment, which was located near the village of Khutorishko. Many T-34s went into battle. Soviet tanks almost immediately reached the village of Chesnovka. In such cases, Wittmann's company was urgently transferred to the "hot spot". In this situation, no special order was required. Wittmann gave the order: "To the tanks!" - and the "tigers" set in motion. Traditionally, next to Wittmann was a no less legendary gunner, Balthasar Woll. It seemed to some that they understood each other without words. Woll, a tall native of the Saarland, was the most successful artillery gunner in the Leibstandarte, and possibly beyond. By January 11, 1944, he had sixty-eight destroyed Soviet tanks on his account. January morning was very cold. Wittmann glanced around the neighborhood in search of camouflaged Soviet anti-tank guns, for which he could not help imbued with well-deserved respect. Woll was ready at any moment to fire an armor-piercing projectile. He didn't need to explain that sometimes a couple of seconds was the boundary between life and

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Commemorative photo. On account of the crew of 88 wrecked tanks

death. No one spoke in the tank, the only sound was the roar of the engine. Tension grew with every minute - they were approaching Chesnovka. Behind Wittmann's tank, several more "tigers" from the 13th company of heavy tanks moved in a ledge. Suddenly, Woll heard the voice of his commander in his headphones: "Attention! Tank for two hours. Woll pressed the pedal, and the tank turret began to turn in the given direction. With both hands, he immediately aimed the gun at the target. The first T-34 appeared in sight. Shot and accurate hit. The turret of a Soviet tank flew off to the side. Wittmann's tank continued to race forward. Now the main mass of Soviet tanks has become visible. Wittmann gave the order to open fire, but Woll himself had long since spotted a suitable target—the closest Soviet tank to them. An armor-piercing projectile, accurately sent, hit him in the side. Woll continued to act like an automaton -

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his forehead was pressed into the headrest of the scope. He fired shells one after the other with sniper accuracy. At the same time, the "tiger" was constantly on the move. This allowed the Wittmann machine not to become a target for Soviet tanks or a hidden anti-tank gun. The mechanic driver maneuvered between the T-34s with filigree precision, only for a moment, slowing down so that Voll could make a new accurate shot. Following Wittmann, other "tigers" entered the battle. Suddenly, a fountain of earth and snow shot up in front of the tank. Wittmann discovered a Soviet self-propelled gun firing at him. Two shots were enough to keep moving forward. When the battle ended, the field around the village presented a terrible picture - it was littered with burning T-34s. Several Soviet tanks withdrew, firing unaimed fire in the direction of the Tigers.

During the fighting on January 12-13, Wittmann once again added to the list of his "trophies". In two days, he had nineteen armored personnel carriers, sixteen T-34s, and three anti-tank guns. Wittmann now had eighty-eight tanks destroyed. Somewhat behind him was Balthazar Woll, who knocked out eighty tanks as a gunner. The appearance of Wittmann's company actually predetermined the outcome of the battle near Chesnovka. The remaining Soviet tanks were burned by the arriving tank group of Sturmbannführer Peiper. In total, the Germans destroyed thirty-seven T-34s and seven self-propelled artillery mounts in this battle.

Soon, Soviet troops tried to break through the German defense line at the positions of the 188th Infantry Regiment, commanded by Colonel von Künsberg. As a result, the "tigers" urgently had to move to the village of Bespechnaya. One of the officers of the Wehrmacht, who was under the command of von Künsberg, recalled: "Then the glorious Peiper sent two

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January 30, 1944. Wittmann's crew leaves the "Tiger"

"tiger". On a neighboring sector of the front, Untersturmführer Wittmann destroyed countless tanks. His only loss was a front tooth." In fact, Wittmann lost his tooth not in a tank, but while riding in an amphibious vehicle. General Balck, without hesitation, personally congratulated Wittmann on his success over the radio. On the same day, a telegram was sent to Berlin proposing that Wittmann be awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross (the cross itself had not yet been awarded). At the same time, the gunner Balthazar Woll was presented to the Knight's Cross.

The day after these events, Michael Wittmann was awarded the Knight's Cross. A few hours later, a message appeared in the Wehrmacht communiqué: "January 9, 1944. Eastern front. SS Untersturmführer Wittmann, commander of the Tiger tank from the SS division Leibstandarte, knocked out his 66th enemy tank.

Actually, in the conditions of fierce fighting

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The presentation of the award to Wittmann passed casually, without any solemn pomp. SS sturmmann Walter Lau recalled this event: "We returned from the front line with four or five Tigers commanded by Wittmann. We left the tanks on the village street. Suddenly, we were ordered to gather in the village square - that was the name of a small empty square located in front of the administrative building. There were twelve or fourteen of us. A few more colleagues remained to guard the tanks we left behind. We were freely standing in a semicircle when a car flew into the makeshift square. It was the commander of our division, Oberführer Teddy Wisch. I was standing on the edge of this half circle, so Wittmann directed me to the regimental commander, Sturmbannführer Peiper, whose command post was about a hundred meters away in one of the Russian huts. I immediately informed the Sturmbannführer that the division commander had arrived, who had arrived at the village square in an all-terrain vehicle "Volkswagen". Somewhat later, Wittmann reported to Vish that the crews of the Tigers were at full strength. Vish then spoke a few words,

in which he praised the crews of the "Tigers" in general and Michael Wittmann in particular. After that, Teddy Vish hung the Knight's Cross around Michael's neck, which was on a long ribbon. Congratulations followed, and Oberführer Wisch and Sturmbannführer Peiper shook hands with Wittmann and all of us. The entire awarding procedure lasted just a few minutes. The situation at the front was critical. There was a war going on and there was no time for special festivities."

Wittmann's outstanding combat successes in the winter of 1943/44 were the result of his vast military experience. But it was they who made the tanker notice far beyond the Leibstandarte. His military forecasts and planning of operations became legendary. By the time of his award, Wittmann had been in command of a heavy tank company for only a few weeks. But on sa

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Piper congratulates Wittmann on his award

In my case, his duties were much more than was supposed to be the commander of a tank company. The division knew that no tank officer prepared for battle more thoroughly than Michael Wittmann. Sometimes on the evening before an operation, he had to spend hours at a map in order to evaluate all the possibilities and find the one and only path to tactical victory. Despite all his experience and all his talents, he never neglected the opinion of other officers and experienced tankers. After considering all the options, weighing all the pros and cons, he made a decision. I repeat, Wittmann never relied on chance or the will of fate.

Those who saw Wittmann on such evenings in some small Ukrainian village often found him distracted and somewhat depressed. But this was only a superficial impression; in fact, the tanker was completely immersed in himself. After many hours of thinking, he left the hut, walked around the tanks, checked how the guard was moving, and then disappeared into the darkness. He

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tried for a while to distract himself from the already prepared scheme of combat. He was often seen smoking alone on the street in the middle of the night.

Wittmann's victories were not an accident or a lucky coincidence. To a large extent, this was the result of extreme mental concentration, which was multiplied by the nature of Michael Wittmann's military talent. Wittmann's "legendary" tactics were just a combination of his skills and the lessons he learned from fighting on the Eastern Front over several years. When assessing the combat situation, he took into account all the risks, which allowed him to make an unmistakable decision. So unmistakable that everyone who was in his entourage felt some natural ease in battle. Actually, none of the historians can accurately describe how his mental activity was built. For a number of reasons, many hours of reflection are left behind the scenes in almost all presentations, which traditionally give way to the actual course of the battles and its results. There is no doubt that Wittmann's success was predetermined by his natural abilities, but they would mean nothing if he did not have the experience and ability to concentrate. Here it was not only a matter of talent. As one of the eyewitnesses wrote: "When I was in his tank, I never left the feeling that it is impossible to deceive him that he will never fall into a trap or trap. But this ability was only the sum of his hard work and the many hours that Michel spent lost in thought. They are not

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Staged photo, for the creation of which rings were circled on the barrel of the gun, symbolizing wrecked tanks

they left him even when he dined with us, when he took a walk or when he was sent to the repair company.

It can be argued that Michael Wittmann was a unique combination of natural abilities in tank battle tactics and unsurpassed zeal.

The maximum use of his military talents and complete concentration on the enemy (regardless of whether they were Soviet and Anglo-American troops) allowed Wittmann to go almost beyond the limits of human capabilities in battle. The instincts of a born tanker allowed him to anticipate potential danger. Wittmann was a panzer virtuoso whose military successes, achieved in a relatively short period of time, were not only amazing, they were unique.

Many of the eyewitnesses said that this masterful tankman had not the slightest  
desires were heard

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talk neither about his victories, nor about the military duty assigned to him. When they spoke of him as a hero of Germany, he tried to refute such claims. Behind Wittmann's icy calm was a rather shy and modest person. That in itself was no small psychological contradiction. Parties and feasts were not his element. When it was a calm evening, he preferred to go to bed early. At the same time, he eschewed communication with people, many noted that he preferred to listen to a greater extent than to speak.

If we talk about his physical data, then we can say that he was 176 centimeters tall. He had blond hair and very piercing light eyes. As mentioned above, he had a sonorous, but not loud voice, in which a slight Bavarian accent was caught. In any case, he often emphasized the second syllable in verbs, which is very characteristic of the Bavarians. His speech was slow, every word was deliberate. With all this, any form of "worship" was absolutely alien to him. Probably, in Germany he was the most violent opponent of the cult of his personality. There was nothing provocative or extravagant in all his behavior. He usually wore a brown leather jacket with a fur collar or the standard black overalls of the tank troops. In communication with colleagues and

subordinates he tried to be as fair as possible.

Michael Wittmann - drawing by Wolfgang Wilrich

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Tank gun barrel cleaning

polite and objective. Almost all tankers felt it. Everyone who knew him personally unanimously stated that he was an ideal company commander.

But at the same time, Wittmann was very intolerant of negligence and negligence, especially in battle. From all his subordinates, he demanded the utmost concentration and readiness for action. When Wittmann did not see such aspirations, he could become tough and even not very pleasant in communication. After each fight, he demanded the immediate bringing of the "tigers" in order. But at the same time, he did not shy away from simple and dirty work - refueling, cleaning the barrel or loading machine-gun belts. He continued to help his crew even when he became a holder of the Knight's Cross. He drove the bolts into the tracks of the tank with a heavy sledgehammer. In any situation, he believed to be an example for the tankers of his company. It was during these days of the winter of 1943/44 that the legend of Michael Wittmann was born.

By noon on January 14, 1944, Wittmann's Tiger Company and Peiper's Panzer Group had completed their preparations to launch an offensive from the Smela area. The main tactical goal of the operation was to destroy

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zhenie Soviet troops in Khutorishka and the capture of the village of Krasnopol. The first tactical goal was achieved without problems - in Khutorishka, German tanks defeated a Soviet infantry regiment unprepared for defense. Krasnopol was captured around 2 p.m. The Leibstandarte tank group no less quickly reached the village of Molochki. Panic broke out among the units of the Red Army. Some of them chaotically retreated, leaving even anti-tank guns in place. Wittmann replenished his "account" with several more tanks.

On January 15, 1944, the forward units of the Leibstandarte linked up with the Panzer Group of the SS Division Reich. The combined tank group ("Leibstandarte" and "Reich") rushed to the northwest in the direction of the village of Lyubar with a powerful jerk.

To stop the tank advance of the SS divisions, the Soviet troops had to concentrate massive artillery and mortar fire. In those battles, the Leibstandarte battle group, which consisted of five Tigers, nine Panthers and five R2GU tanks, was able to inflict the following losses on the Red Army: six tanks, twenty anti-tank guns, sixty field guns, thirty-two trucks and many other vehicles. Of special events, it can be mentioned that during these battles, on January 16, 1944, Balthazar Woll received his Knight's Cross. He became the first gunner in the Waffen-SS to be awarded this high German award. Now Wittmann's crew included two holders of the Knight's Cross, which in itself was a very rare occurrence,

If we talk about the fate of Balthasar Woll, Bobby, or Balti, as his friends called him, then I must say that this miniature tankman was born | September 1922 in Wemmetsweiler, in the Saarland. He came from a working class family. After finishing school, he worked as an electrician. On August 15, 1941, he volunteered for the Waffen-SS. At first he was a member of the machine-gun

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Balthasar Woll (left)

teams of the 3rd company of the 1st regiment of the "Dead Head" division. Woll gained his first combat experience in the notorious Demyansk pocket (Novgorod region), where, at the very beginning of the war, Soviet troops were able to surround several German divisions, including the SS division "Totenkopf". In the encirclement, Woll was seriously wounded and taken out of the encirclement via an air bridge. After being wounded, he ended up in a hospital in Germany. On July 23, 1942, SS Oberschutz Woll was awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class, and three days later, the Wound Badge. After he was cured, Woll at the end of 1942 was sent to the newly formed heavy tank company of the Leibstandarte. As part of this SS division, he went through all the battles in which the Leibstandarte took part from the beginning of 1943. By the summer of 1943, that is, by the beginning of Operation Citadel, Balthazar Woll was considered one of the best artillery gunners who fought on the Tigers. On September 16, 1943, SS navigator Woll was awarded the Iron Cross First Class, and on November 9 of the same year he received the rank of Rottenführer.

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ra SS. As a member of the crew of Michael Wittmann, Balthazar Woll outperformed almost all German gunners. By January 13, 1944, he had destroyed eighty tanks and one hundred and seven anti-tank guns. By and large, Michael Wittmann's success would not have been possible without Bobby Woll. His lightning-fast reaction, sharp eyesight and excellent rangefinder allowed Michael Wittmann to become the No. 1 tanker. Wittmann and Woll were the perfect team. If loaders, radio operators and drivers in Wittmann's crew often



changed, then Voll was its permanent member. The tank commander and the gunner understood each other so well that, as is known, Woll opened fire on a target before Wittmann had time to point it out. At the same time, there was not a single case when the famous gunner-gunner made a mistake with her choice.

In January 1944, the other crew members of the Wittmann tank were: SS Panzeroberschütze Werner Irrgang (gunner-radio operator), SS navigator Eugen Schmilt (driver), SS Panzerschütz Sepp Rösner (dawn

Radio operator Werner Irrgang Driver Eugen Schmidt

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reaping). But initially Wittmann's crew was somewhat different. So, for example, in May 1943 he looked like this: SS navigators Siegfried Fuss, Bobby Woll, Karl Lieber (radio operator) and Max Gaube (loader).

If we talk about the effectiveness of the "tigers", then they caused true horror in the Soviet troops. Loading Sepp Rösner.

There could be many reasons for this. We present only one. Between December 5 and January 17, 1944, a handful of still battle-worthy Tigers in the Leibstandarte SS division destroyed one hundred and forty-six Soviet tanks and one hundred and twenty-five anti-tank guns!

The award of the Knight's Cross to Wittmann and Woll made the 13th heavy tank company perhaps the most elite unit in the entire Leibstandarte. But in the company itself, such a reputation was treated coolly. There was not even time in it to celebrate (albeit symbolically) the awarding of famous tankers. By the way, this award was by no means the only one. Helmut Wendorff was presented to the Knight's Cross. The Knight's Cross was already with the former company commander Kling. The company's reputation as the most effective combat unit was not far-fetched. During fourteen weeks of fighting (Kharkov, Kursk, Zhitomir, Berdichev), the forces of a single tank company of the Red Army inflicted the following damage: 343 tanks, 8 self-propelled guns, 225 heavy anti-tank guns. At the same time, only twenty-four "tigers" were lost during all this time! Number of field guns and vehicles destroyed

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Piper talking to Wittmann and Woll

just couldn't be counted. These figures alone indicate the significance of the appearance of the Tiger tank on the Eastern Front.

On January 19, 1944, the Leibstandarte was withdrawn to the city of Khmilnik. At that time, a company of heavy tanks almost ceased to exist. Only one "Tiger" was in service, two required current short-term repairs, and six more needed major repairs. But at the same time, the strength of the Leibstandarte tank regiment was restored. It contained thirty-six Panthers and thirty-three RU tanks. Compared to previous days, this was an undoubted progress. During the fighting near Berdichev, the Leibstandarte showed that, thanks to offensive tactics, German tanks could successfully conduct combat operations against clearly superior Soviet forces.

On January 22, 1944, the division "Leibstandarte" was part of XXXXX! (46th) tank corps, commanded by an infantry general

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Michael Wittmann with the officers of the tank regiment "Leibstandarte"

Gollnik. On January 24, the 1st SS Panzer Division took up positions northeast of Vinnitsa. The bad weather made any movement very difficult. But this did not prevent the divisions of the German tank corps from launching an offensive that day and pushing back the Soviet troops. The Germans had the opportunity to encircle eight Soviet divisions.

Meanwhile, another award ceremony took place in Wittmann's company. On January 24, 1944, SS-Untersturmführer Walter Hahn was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class. Unlike Wittmann or Wendorf, he was not a "great tank destroyer". But this did not prevent him from enjoying respect and love in the 13th tank company. Walter Lau recalled "Papa Khan": "True, he was not the type of" impetuous lieutenant ",

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to which Michel and "Bubi" could be attributed, but he was a wonderful person. Khan spoke with a slight Rhenish accent. He liked to joke and we loved him. He was a reserve Untersturmführer, and in our situation seemed to be a man of almost advanced age. However, from the very beginning of the war he was at the front in tank troops. We affectionately called him "Papa Khan". One day in February 1944, I was a gunner in his crew. For several days we sat idle and did nothing but clean our weapons. I don't know how it happened. We sat in a Russian hut with a thatched roof. Suddenly, a pistol shot rang out and sparks fell on the straw. The hut was engulfed in flames so quickly that we, having taken a few things, barely managed to save ourselves. Then "papa Khan" said in his Cologne dialect: "Boys, you have no right to burn the hut to the ground without informing me about it." That was "Papa Khan". The next day we found ourselves on the front line as part of a group of three "tigers" who were in ambush. This section of the front was held by the battalion of Sturmbannführer Zandig. A company of grenadiers, led either by an Oberto or a Hauptscharführer, was sitting in a trench. A terrible rain poured down, streams of which were mixed with snow. In order to observe the positions of the enemy, we were forced to open the hatches and lean out of them. Then "daddy" spewed out a stream of ridiculous curses in his Cologne dialect. He addressed them to the weather, to the Reds, to Peter, to the war, to the generals who pushed us into this slush. He didn't wear an "iron collar" - that's what we called the Knight's Cross on the award ribbon - but he was an excellent comrade."

Meanwhile, on January 25, 1944, the Leibstandarte continued its offensive. The Tigers under the command of Untersturmführer Wittmann attacked the Soviet positions west of the Kalinovka-Uman railway line. Despite the fact that German tanks were attacked more than once by Soviet attack aircraft and dive

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bombers, these raids did not lead to any losses. As a result, the "tigers" reached height 316.6, located to the west of the village of Ocheretnya. During this march, Wittmann was able to knock out several Soviet tanks, but now this is no longer something surprising. Such results were almost self-evident. The next day the Leibstandarte was already attacking in a southeasterly direction. Leading ahead of all the advancing units, the "tigers" overcame the anti-tank ditch and began to move in the direction of the village of Ganovka. By noon, the Germans captured the village of Napadovka. Closer to midnight, Soviet troops were driven out of the village of Rososha. It was here that the "Tigers" were refueled and received the necessary ammunition.

On January 27, 1944, the "tigers" were introduced into the Kulman battle group, which was supposed to attack in the direction of the town of Lipovets, which was an important railway junction. At 05:30, the Tigers approached their target. But since they could not refuel at night, they were forced to go on the defensive. The counterattacks of the Red Army were not long in coming. A fight ensued. During its course, the tank group knocked out

twenty-six Soviet tanks.

Walter Lau described how he stood watch on the turret of Wittmann's tank: "At that time I was a gunner on Wittmann's crew. However, it only lasted a few days. And somehow I fell asleep in the tank turret. Wittmann caught him red-handed and pulled his ear several times. Actually, that was all - no screams, no penalties.

On January 29, 1944, the Kulman combat group attacked Babin. The Soviet units had to retreat in order not to be surrounded. During the January battles, Wittmann managed to knock out several dozen more T-34s. Now no one perceived it as a military miracle. By January 29, on his "account" there were 117 lined with

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The Leibstandarte division commander, SS-Brigadeführer Wisch and SS-Sturmbannführer Peiper congratulate Wittmann's crew

SS-Brigadeführer Wisch and Wittmann's crew

Piper congratulates the loading Rösner

vet tanks. Wittmann was turning into a living legend, a unique phenomenon not only for the Eastern Front, but for all German tank forces. January 30, 1944 Wittmann was awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. Let's look at the statistics of tanks destroyed by Wittmann. As early as January 7, 1944, he was listed as an officer who destroyed 56 Soviet tanks. That is, in twenty-two days of fighting on the right-bank Ukraine, Wittmann was able to beat sixty-one T-34s! It was an incredible number. Wittmann almost overnight became top of the list of the most successful officers of the Third Reich. Together with the Oak Leaves, he was awarded the title of SS Obersturmführer. And the next day, Wittmann received a personal telegram from Hitler. In it, the Führer congratulated Wittmann on the conferment of the next rank and receiving an award. In services

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Several articles appeared in the Black Corps magazine of the SS (their text will be given in the next chapter). Wittmann (already in the rank of SS Brigadeführer) and Johan Peiper once again visited Wittmann. War correspondents frequented Wittmann. Film news broadcasts featured footage taken by SS military chronicler Büschel of Wisch and Peiper congratulating Wittmann's crew. The same Bueschel took several well-known photographs of the crew of the "Tiger" 504 with a camera. These photographs show special marks on the barrel of a tank gun, which should indicate the number of knocked out tanks. Especially for the correspondent, nondescript marks of dark color were circled in white paint. In fact, white stripes on the barrel were almost never used in tank troops. As a result, almost all members of Wittmann's crew received awards. Radio operator Werner Irrgang, loader Sepp Rösler and driver mechanic Eugen Schmilt each received the Iron Cross Second Class. In addition, Wittmann personally saw to it that Siegfried Fuss, who ended up in the SS Junker School, was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Bobby Woll got a vacation and immediately went to his home. In addition, he was awarded the title of SS Unterscharführer. Wittmann himself received an invitation to Hitler's Headquarters, where the Führer was to personally hand him the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. Even the company cook, SS Unterscharführer Jakob Mors, was presented for the award, who was awarded the Iron Cross of the second class for the fact that, despite the dangers, he always delivered food to the tankmen on the front line on time. On January 31, 1944, another surprise awaited the German tankers. South of the village of Morozovka, about a thousand Red Army soldiers voluntarily surrendered. The Leibstandarte was planned to be transferred to another sector of the front.

One distinguishing feature of the winter of 1943/44 was the disruption of supplies. As a result, in

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Congratulations from the officers of the tank regiment "Leibstandarte"

many German combat units began to flourish a kind of "barter". Marine leather jackets and leather pants were very popular among tankers. It was not just fashion, a kind of chic. The fact is that leather clothes did not burn well, and the tankers in the wrecked car had more chances of survival in them. Usually such an exchange took place through the anti-aircraft battalions of the SS. The tankers offered 88-millimeter shells, which the crew often had in abundance, while the anti-aircraft gunners felt an acute shortage of them.

SS sturmmann Walter Lau, in those days a gunner in the crew of Unterscharführer Kleber, recalled the art of such barter: "Usually, when we stopped in a village, we immediately began to search for food. Once we found a pig standing in full

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loneliness in a barn. We scored it and intended to eat it. Someone lit a blowtorch to scorch her. But at that very moment we heard a shot from a tank gun nearby. Ivans, supported by T-34s, attacked the village. Wittmann was the first to be ready for battle, his tank rushed out of the village to intercept 7-34. He was able to destroy several Soviet tanks. We wrapped the pig in a tent tarpaulin, tied it up with a rope and hung it from the tank turret. We intended to follow Wittmann, but found that the gun's electric drive had been knocked out. At that very moment, our commander, Unterscharführer Kleber, noticed a Soviet self-propelled gun at a distance of 1500 meters from us. It was SU-152. What to do?

Our Quax somehow gave birth to an idea that we played several times in theory. He removed the cover from the electric battery, using two long wires, he started the turning mechanism of the tower. As an artillery gunner, I pointed the gun in the right direction. Kleber fired a shot. Despite the fact that the projectile bounced off the self-propelled gun in a shower of sparks, it still caused some damage to the enemy vehicle. Kurt Kleber himself was one of the natives of the Luftwaffe. He became a tank commander quite recently. In one battle, the shock wave threw off the tank's turret, but it remained unscathed. He was nicknamed "Quax the Unlucky Pilot" because he looked a lot like actor Heinia Rühmann from the film of the same name. The Quax itself looked very belligerent. He wore a leather jacket with fur, which betrayed panzergrenadier. She even had a fur hood. But at that time the jacket was torn to shreds, the fur was stuck right to the body, and the hood turned into some kind of rag. As a result, he began to wear a Russian hat (in the original - *yyarka*. - Author) with a dead head of the SS sewn onto it. Wittmann could not help noticing him like this: "Quax, buddy, you should dress more conspicuously! Otherwise, they will take you for a Russian and our soldiers will shoot you at dusk."

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However, Kvaks was not interested in such things. The only thing he did was throw back his ears hats and tied them on his head.

Quite often, the 13th company of heavy tanks of the Leibstandarte, small in its composition by January 1944, fell into insignificant encirclement. One of the tankers recalled: "The fact that we were surrounded was suggested to me by the fact that our rocket launchers fired not a volley, but only a few shots. They needed ammunition, and we needed fuel. Our morality has naturally fallen to the lowest level. It was getting dark, and it was also very cold. What were we supposed to do tonight? Wittmann ordered four or five "tigers" to be placed around one Russian hut so that their guns were directed in different directions. The tanks were left with only sentries, while the rest warmed themselves in the hut. There was no desire to sleep, as the situation was very critical. But the night passed quietly, except for a few skirmishes that were conducted by the grenadiers, who set hedgehogs on the outskirts of the village. We had so little fuel that Wittmann did not even give the order to withdraw the tanks from the edge of the village. We were overjoyed when the next day we heard rumors that tanks from the neighboring 16th Panzer Division were already on their way to us and carrying fuel so precious to us.

Our joy knew no bounds when the first RU appeared on the outskirts of the village, which towed several trucks behind it. After refueling and replenishing ammunition, we moved towards Cherkassy.

On February 1, 1944, the command of the "Leibstandarte" gave the order to transfer the tanks of the division by rail to the village of Monastyrishche. Three "Tigers" required major repairs, and therefore they could not be towed to the railway station. It was decided to blow them up. As a result, Wittmann's company was left with six ready to take part in the battles of heavy tanks. Infantry and panzergrenadier units were transferred to trucks

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kah in the area of the villages of Kishentsy - Kharkovka - Dzengelevka - Nesterovka.

To continue the story of Wittmann's tank company, let's fast forward a month earlier to another sector of the Eastern Front. On January 5, 1944, the Soviet command launched a major offensive, during which Soviet troops attacked the positions of the 8th German Army. The offensive developed very successfully. As a result, the units of the Red Army were tasked with encircling and destroying XI and XXXXI army corps. For this, it was decided to take them in pincers. One blow was delivered from Kirovograd, the other from Kanev. Two powerful wedges were supposed to meet in the area of the city of Zvenigorodka. This is how the Cherkasy cauldron arose, in which, as planned by the Soviet command, there were XI (General Stemmerman) and XXXXI (General Lieb) army corps. If you list all the trapped German divisions, then this list looks like this: 57th, 72nd, 88th, 112th, 167th, 168th, 332nd, 389th infantry divisions, 213th Security Division, 5th SS Panzer Division "Viking" and SS Assault Brigade "Wallonia".

To release the encircled 50,000 German soldiers, a powerful strike force was assembled as part of the 3rd Panzer Corps. It included the 1st Panzer Division of Major General Koll, the 16th Panzer Division of Major General Back, the 198th Infantry Division of General von Hoven, as well as parts of the 17th Panzer Division and the "Beke Panzer Regiment ". All these formations were part of the 1st Panzer Army, commanded by General Hube.

But on February 2, 1944, there was a dramatic change in the weather. The thaw began and the snowy plains turned into impassable swamps. By that time, SS-Obersturmführer Wendorff had returned to the Leibstandarte Panzer Regiment. Upon his arrival, the adjutant of the regiment commander, SS-Hauptsturmführer Nüske, handed him the body

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gram from Michael Wittmann. In reply, Wendorff wrote: "Nüske read your telegram to me as soon as I returned from the rear. Until you return!, I have the honor of commanding the 13th heavy tank company. But I am in great anxiety and concern, as I found only a bunch of debris and piles of metal.

Three "tigers" from Wendorf's company arrived on February 5, 1944 in the village of Krasnoe. The next day, the shock tank group, commanded by Sturmbannführer Kuhlman, launched an attack on the village of Tinovka. In fact, it was very difficult to call it a battalion (just such a force should usually have a battle group). Under the command of Kuhlmann there were two "tigers", nine "panthers", on the armor of which a couple of dozen grenadiers from the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment of the "Leibstandarte" rode. The 1st SS Panzer Division itself was to advance in an easterly direction, covering the rear and flank of the III Panzer Corps along the Tynovka-Kozyakovka line. On February 7, 1944, Wendorf with his "tigers" entered the battle on the western outskirts of the villages of Tynovka and Votylevka. By 3 pm, several Soviet tanks were able to break through the German defense line and rush down the road that ran south of the village of Fedlyukovka. One of the "tigers" was able to knock out two Soviet tanks, five T-34s were destroyed by the rest of the German crews. In total, four "tigers" took part in the battle.

For some time, it was relatively quiet on the sector of the front where the Kulman battle group fought. There were only occasional skirmishes here. But on February 9, 1944, Soviet troops launched an attack. As a result, the Kulman group had to engage in battle near the village of Tatyankovka. The Germans managed to repulse the attack of the Red Army units. On February 10, the Leibstandarte division already

Wittmann left for Berlin to meet with Hitler. More on this in the next chapter.

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held a section of the front along the line: Tatyankovka - Votylevka - Tynovka. Soviet troops created a defensive line near the neighboring village of Repki. But they did not succeed. In the evening of the same day, an SS tank reconnaissance battalion under the command of Sturmbannführer Knittel suddenly attacked Repki and almost instantly drove out the Soviet units from there.

In fact, the "tigers" remained in Tynovka until February 15th. Huge open spaces and bad weather conditions did not allow the Leibstandarte tank units to be properly supplied with everything necessary. In those days, tankers had to eat mostly canned food. But this was not the main problem. Much more alarming was the lack of ammunition and fuel. Things got to the point that tank machine guns had to be used. Meanwhile, the 3rd Panzer Corps was moving further north. The 16th German Panzer Division reached the village of Dashukovka. From this place it was necessary to go forward some 20 kilometers in order to eventually break through the line of encirclement, in which the German divisions found themselves.

If you look at the everyday life of the 13th tank company, which was temporarily on vacation, it should be noted that on February 12, 1944, Obersturmführer Helmut Wendorff was awarded the Knight's Cross. "Bubi" was known as a brave commander of a tank platoon, who by the time of his award knocked out 58 tanks. Despite the fact that this was half that of Wittmann, Wendorff was in any case one of the most successful tankers of the Leibstandarte. The respite for the Leibstandarte did not last long. On February 14, 1944, the 1st SS Panzer Division was ordered to advance in a southeasterly direction to capture Frankivka. But the catastrophic condition of the roads led to the fact that most of the tanks broke down on the way to their original positions. As a result, only three tanks took part in the offensive (Tiger, Panther, R7 [U]) and one assault

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tool. The stronger units of the "Leibstandarte" by the night of February 16 were to reach the village of Shubennyi Stav. The commander of the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment, Sturmbannführer Zandig, received an order to break through to the village of Oktyabr, where he was to join up with the German units in the cauldron. But as a result, the Heimann combat group, which included tank units, also came to this village. By February 17, the date of breaking through the Soviet encirclement, the Zandig regiment was located somewhat south of October in the village of Lysyanka. The sudden heavy snowfall and the severe frosts made it difficult to move, but the onset of cold should have bound the swamp. The German units that were still surrounded were to urgently destroy all unnecessary equipment and weapons. By this time, the diameter of the boiler had shrunk somewhere to four or five kilometers. The goal of the German units breaking through to the west was to be Hill 239, which was located near October. On February 16, 1944, at 11 p.m., the German units launched a breakthrough in a westerly direction. One of the first groups that broke through the Soviet encirclement from the inside was the reconnaissance battalion of the SS division "Viking", commanded by Obersturmführer Debus. At around 04:30, units of the Viking division ended up near Hill 239, where they came under heavy fire from Soviet artillery. As a result, they were forced to turn back to the east. They had to cross the river Rotten Tikich. That was the only way to escape from the encirclement. Many of the Germans drowned in this river. But most of the SS division "Viking" still went to the positions of the "Leibstandarte". Early on the morning of February 17, the tanks of the 1st SS division attacked Oktyabr, which was still held by the Soviet troops. Here they came across a powerful anti-tank line. Bloody ensued

the battle. The "tigers" that arrived from the repair were able to destroy several Soviet tanks and knock out some

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"Panther" "Leibstandarte" in the Ukrainian mud

anti-tank guns. As a result, on this sector of the front, they pulled over most of the units of the Red Army. This allowed the "Vikings" to get out of the Soviet encirclement. Pursued by the red cavalry, the first Vikings reached the German positions around noon on February 17, 1944. At this time, the commander of the SS assault brigade "Wallonia" Hauptsch Turmführer Leon Degrel was waiting in the dark for an opportune moment to strike October from the forest with his detachment. "Without food and water, we lasted until the morning, only absorbing handfuls of snow. In our snow shelters, we snuggled up to each other to somehow keep warm. But most of all, we looked forward to the end of this terrible day, which was saturated with fear. Only when darkness fell and the tanks on the hill could not see our movements did we leave our hiding places. We moved forward in strict order at half past five in the evening. The scouts went ahead. We advanced two kilometers along a path that went deep into the swamps. But even on the path, our knee-deep feet were buried in mud. None of the units of the Red Army noticed us. We

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up the snow-covered slope. It was bathed in moonlight. One by one we crossed this dangerous place. In wild excitement, we moved on a hundred and fifty meters. Suddenly, three steel-helmeted figures appeared in front of us. Everything is over. We hugged each other, jumped, shouted and laughed."

Approximately 34,000 German soldiers managed to escape from the Cherkasy Pocket. Another 20 thousand remained in it killed, wounded and taken prisoner. In the last days of February, Soviet troops tried to "block" the "October Corridor". But all these attempts were unsuccessful. During these battles, one of the "tigers" was destroyed, four more were seriously damaged, they were towed for repairs. The Leibstandarte departed. On February 23, 1944, Wendorff wrote the following lines in a letter to Wittmann: "Most of the trucks, while moving in the Uman region, get stuck in the mud ... Not a single car can move on ... These days, our modest forces helped free the soldiers, encircling - women's to the west of Cherkassy. Most of them, despite the mud, were able to escape from the boiler. But most of all, I was pleased with the behavior of the Viking division, without which all this might have turned into one big tragedy.

On February 2, 1944, at Hitler's Headquarters "Wolfschanze", Michael Wittmann accepted from the hands of the Fuhrer his award - Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. Hitler had a long conversation with the legendary tanker, asking about his combat experiences and the general situation on the Eastern Front. In the course of this conversation, the Fuhrer promised the tankman that the 13th company of the Leibstandarte would receive as many "tigers" as there were crews for this. In addition, Hitler inquired about Wittmann's personal life: he asked if he was married and if a wedding was planned. From the view of the Fuhrer during the conversation did not escape. that Wittmann did not have a front tooth. As a result, the tanker was sent to Hitler's personal dentist.

How could one crew destroy 117 tanks? Maybe it was just luck? Really,  
luck ig

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February 2, 1944. Fuhrer's headquarters. Hitler presents Wittmann with the Knight's Cross with Oak leaves

played a small role, but to a large extent it was a technique for using "tigers" in tank battles. To all this one could add conscientious and thorough preparation of each combat operation. But in any case, the military success of Michael Wittmann, which he achieved by the beginning of 1944, was unprecedented.

In the first days of 1944, the war correspondent Joachim Fernau, who spent some time with Wittmann in battle, wrote: "... We often ate food together. He, somewhat thoughtful, quiet and self-absorbed, often gave the impression of an absent-minded person. But, in truth, his anxiety and concern were just a manifestation of his responsibility. He was always glad to be among his people, who rejoiced in his presence. But he behaved so directly very rarely, usually he was deeply immersed in himself. For some time he commanded a company of "tigers", which

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in terms of its combat strength, it was actually a battalion. He himself was one of the youngest SS Untersturmführer. He took his duties very seriously. He sat in the evenings all over the maps and listened attentively to every word, to all the suggestions that came from other experienced tank commanders. When he led tanks to the enemy, he moved at the head of the company. He was so sure of himself that it could mislead an outside observer. Many mistakenly believed that everything was very easy for him, that the talent given to him by God allowed him to create like Mozart, who literally wrote an overture to Don Juan in one night. When I was in his tank, the feeling did not leave me that Wittmann could not make a mistake, that he could not fall into any trap. But in reality it was only a set of painstaking work. many hours of reflection, when Michael sat, immersed in himself for hours. During these moments, he did not hear anyone address him. At night, he could take off on his "Tiger" as easily as if he was heading for a walk. He is an example that should enlighten many young officers who naively believe that they have to wait only one moment to accomplish the feat and become great soldiers. Every hour, every minute, Wittmann felt responsible for his people, for the equipment handed over to him, for the results of the upcoming battle. He did not immediately acquire his military qualities, did not immediately become a holder of the Knight's Cross and Oak Leaves to him. It was a long and painstaking process that largely went unnoticed by senior officers."

Siegfried Fuss, who was a mechanic in Wittmann's crew from 1943 to January 1944, described his command style in this way: "In ordinary circumstances, there was nothing to suggest that Wittmann and Woll were outstanding experts in their field. Despite their exceptional success, there was not an iota of arrogance in them.

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The most famous photo of the Wittmann tank crew. Glory to the Right: Werner Irrgang, Bobby Woll, Michael Wittmann, Sepp Rösner and Eugen Schmidt

In each specific situation, they tried to concentrate as much as possible. They never underestimated the enemy. They did not allow themselves this when there were more than a dozen wrecked tanks behind them. Our relationship was based on his skills. Wittmann had an amazing ability to communicate them to others, which was ideal for coordinating activities. The information given by Wittmann was extremely prompt, calm and brief. Voll understood him perfectly, as he often fired faster than he received the order. After the fight, we all wondered how it could happen that he fired a shot so quickly. The success of our tank crew was based on the independence and professionalism of each individual. This meant that, as a driver, I was also responsible for

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target selection. Our radio operator, Karl Lieber, had to pinpoint their exact location. This mattered when there were a lot of targets - this primarily applied to battles in the villages.



For example, an anti-tank gun could be in the direction for two hours, and the next target was already at eleven o'clock. But the tower could not turn in a fraction of a second. A vivid example can be "post-Kharkov battles." We constantly remembered them. An attack on a large city, which is held by well-fortified tanks and anti-tank guns. We made our way extremely quickly, destroying several tanks and guns, after which we reached the city itself. Our targets were scattered in a wide front at positions from three to twelve o'clock. Suddenly, a tank "Iosif Stalin-1" appeared from a haystack to our left, the gun of which was pointed directly at us. Wittmann ordered: "Turn to the left and at full speed one hundred meters ahead." We were able to get out of the line of fire. Similar actions of our commander led to the fact that only in that battle we knocked out enemy tanks to spot them. In many ways, this was successful, since Wittmann used the experience that he learned from those times when he fought on an assault gun. In many ways, he avoided turning on the spot, which could lead to damage and even loss of tank tracks.

In those days, many newspapers and magazines wrote about Michael Wittmann. Perhaps it makes sense to cite an excerpt from one of them, which was written by Joachim Fernau, who was familiar with the tanker. It was published in the SS magazine Black Corps.

"Michael Wittmann.

Born in Vogeltal, and later living in Ingoldstadt, 29-year-old Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann is one of the "old men" of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. The young peasant joined the Waffen-SS as early as 1937. Then he served as an infantry instructor in Berlin-Lichterfeld.

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However, when the Leibstandarte received its first six assault guns in 1940, Wittmann decided to devote himself to armored forces. After a fleeting battle in Greece, these assault guns, one of which was commanded by Wittmann, rushed into the vast expanses of the east. At the very beginning of hostilities in the East, his company collided with a group of 18 enemy tanks. When the assault weapon destroyed six of them, the enemy turned to flight. Wittmann, the hero of this battle, was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class. A little later he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Wounded twice, he went to Germany for treatment. During one of his stays in his homeland, he entered the officer training courses, which were held at the SS cadet school in Bad Tölz. In early 1943, he climbed the Tiger Tower for the first time! On the first day of the battle for Belgorod, he destroyed eight enemy tanks and seven heavy guns. Five days later, his list already included: thirty T-34s, twenty-eight anti-tank guns and two batteries of field artillery. In the battle that took place on the Kiev highway, he was able to knock out thirteen T-34s and seven heavy anti-tank guns in just one day. On December 6, with his fire, he was able to destroy a powerful anti-tank front and at the same time knocked out three Soviet tanks. Three "Tigers", which he led on January 9 in a swift attack on the enemy, suddenly found themselves in front of twenty Soviet tanks. Wittmann single-handedly destroyed six of them. Two days later, he increased the number of destroyed tanks to 66. Taking into account his courage and bravery, the Fuhrer awarded Wittmann the Knight's Cross.

1 Perhaps this phrase gave a number of researchers (F. Kurovski and others) a reason to assert that Wittmann was the commander of the "tiger" from the very beginning of the formation of the Leibstandarte heavy tank company. This overlooks the fact that until mid-1943 he was the commander of a platoon of light tanks, and moved to the "Tiger" literally on the eve of the "Citadel" operation.

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After a visit to Hitler, Wittmann was expected to be congratulated in his native Vogeltal. It was a small town, even more like a village, where about 140 people lived. All of them came out to meet their legendary countryman. The first to congratulate him was NSDAP Kreisleiter Reinhardt.

Neumarkt, then he was joined by the head of the administrative district, Dr. Burger. The honoring of the tanker took place in a local hotel, which was not able to accommodate everyone who wanted to see Michael Wittmann up close. At the end of the ceremony, the burgomaster of Vogelthal presented Wittmann with a certificate, from which it followed that he had become an honorary citizen. There were no gifts. The city authorities presented the tanker with a splendidly designed "Military History" in ten volumes. Kreisleiter Neumarkt presented him with an oil painting. In his response speech, Wittmann said: "I did nothing but fulfill my military

Congratulations in your native Vogelthal

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February 1944. There was no end to those who wanted to be photographed with Wittmann and his bride

duty. In combat, we do not think about danger. We strive to destroy the enemy and experience joy when this goal is achieved. Our military service is not only dangerous events and difficult times, but also the most wonderful thing that life could give us, since the war allowed us to find true comradeship. It is significant that in his speech, which was not devoid of some pro-propaganda clichés, Wittmann attacked not the "Bolshevik hordes," which would be quite logical, since he fought exclusively on the Eastern Front, but against the Anglo-American gangsters, "who with their bombing sowed devastation and chaos on German soil." The congratulations ended with a small modest dinner, which could be afforded in a small town, which was accompanied by a concert of girls from the local organization BDM'. Wittmann was constantly surrounded by young people, many of the German boys wanted to get his autograph. By the way, something similar awaited Balthazar Woll in the Saar.

| The League of German Girls is a girls' organization within the structure of the Hitler Youth.

## Chapter 7 SPECIAL TACTICAL UNIT

Before continuing the story of the fate of Michael Wittmann, let's look at the changes that took place in Germany in the second half of 1943. After the defeat at Stalingrad, the Reich headed for the beginning of a "total war", that is, when all domestic and foreign policy served exclusively military purposes. At that time, German units had to stay in various parts of Europe and Africa: beyond the Arctic Circle, in Scandinavia, in France, in Italy, in the Balkans, on the island of Crete, in the territories of the USSR. As a result, there was nothing surprising in the fact that new formations began to form within the Waffen-SS. It is noteworthy that this process began only in the fourth year of the Second World War. Already at the beginning of 1943, it was decided that on the basis of the "Leibstandarte" a new formation of the SS troops would be created, whose rank and file would consist of volunteers from the ranks of the Hitler Youth, and the non-commissioned officer corps of former "graduates" of this youth National Socialist organizations. Plans to create a new SS division began to be discussed at Hitler's headquarters as early as February 1944. As a result, the new division of the Waffen-SS received the name "Hitler Youth". Together with the SS division Leibstandarte, it formed the 1st SS Panzer Corps.

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"Tigers" of the 101st SS tank battalion on exercises. Spring 1944

The next step in the formation of the Hitler Youth division was the order of June 24, 1943, when it was proclaimed panzergrenadier. But, despite this, from the very beginning this formation was formed exclusively as a tank division. On July 27, 1943, the combat schedule of the 1st SS Panzer Corps was officially approved. Sepp Dietrich was appointed its commander. As a result, this tank corps was mentioned in almost all documents.

just like the corps of the "Leib standard". This emphasized the fact that the Hitler Youth division was formed precisely on the basis of the Leib Standard.

The tank regiment of the Hitler Youth division, which was formed on the basis of a tank battalion, was initially supposed to be formed in France, but then it was decided that parts of the corps would be additionally formed in Beneschau (near Prague) and in Berlin (Lichterfeld). Actually, the corps units that were not included in any of the divisions were a tank battalion, a heavy artillery battalion, a rocket artillery battalion, an anti-aircraft battery, a medical battalion and several other units. Fritz Kremer, holder of the Knight's Cross, was appointed chief of staff of the corps. Kremer himself moved to the Waffen-SS from the Wehrmacht, where he was a colonel. In the SS troops, he was awarded the knowledge of Oberführer.

At the end of May 1943, from the ranks of the Leibstandar

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that ", which was transformed near Kharkov, several non-commissioned officers were allocated, who were sent to study in Paderborn. There they ended up as part of the 500th training heavy tank battalion, which was formally subordinate to the Wehrmacht. This unit was responsible for the training of army crews FOR the "tigers". In fact, this was the first step towards the creation of the 101st heavy tank battalion, which had a corps regiment. After the beginning of the formation of this special tactical unit, part of the employees of the 13th heavy tank company of the Leibstandarte were sent to Paderborn. But nevertheless, most of them turned out to come from assault guns, from where, in fact, Michael Wittmann himself switched to tanks at one time. The formation of the 1st heavy tank battalion was entrusted to SS-Sturmbannführer Heinz von Westernhagen, who from June 1942 commanded an assault gun battalion as part of the SS division "Leibstandarte". The choice fell on him largely for subjective reasons. The fact is that at the very beginning of Operation Citadel, von Westernhagen was seriously wounded and had to stay in the rear for treatment for a long time. Officially, he was appointed commander of the 101st tank battalion a little later - on August 5, 1943.

The structure of the new tank battalion was to be as follows: a battalion headquarters, a headquarters company, three tank companies fully equipped with Tigers, and a maintenance company. The illustrious 13th heavy tank company of the Leibstandarte, commanded by Michael Wittmann by the beginning of 1944, was to become the 3rd tank company of the 101st heavy tank battalion. But it was not possible to recall her from the front, so formally the formation of the battalion went on without her.

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Amphibious ride on the lake

In November 1943, all units of the 101st tank battalion that did not take part in the battles on the Eastern Front were transferred from Paderborn to the south, to Augustdorf. For some time, the command of the battalion was entrusted to Obersturmführer Liner. This 38-year-old SS man commanded an anti-tank battalion of the Totenkopf Division during the Western campaign of 1940, and in the battles near Kharkov in 1943 he was already a tanker. In addition, Liner was married to one of the daughters of Theodor Eick, the first commander of the SS division "Totenkopf". To all this it must be added that the Liner was neither popular nor respected among the employees of the 101st tank battalion. Many noted that he was arrogant and callous.

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On November 19, 1943, Philipsen arrived in Augustdorf. But since the broken kneecap began to give complications, it was decided to make him a teacher and a special instructor. In those days, the composition of the 101st tank battalion that did not fight in the East

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Von Westernhagen (in camouflage uniform) and Raash discuss the plan of action ahead

was located in special brick barracks, while the tanks and vehicles were in special hangars at the training ground. In general, the situation was gloomy, but this did not affect the morale of the tankers. In the camp they had a special cinema, in addition, they were allowed to walk around the outskirts of Detmold.

SS sturmman Alfred Lünzer, one of the veterans of the 13th tank company of the Leibstandarte, recalled Augustdorf as follows: "We had to be trained in a tank company of the Wehrmacht. I became lieutenant Velkel's orderly. There were fifteen of us who came from the old part. There was nothing to teach us, and therefore we were entrusted with completely different functions. Wehrmacht officers lived in barracks. The Hauptsturmführer was also located there.

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Schweimer. One day Obersturmführer Raasch came to us. His orderly, like Schweimer, was one of fifteen veterans. Hanno Raasch didn't know anything about the "tiger", but he didn't want to look like army officers from the Wehrmacht. In the end, I had to train him. Every day we drove up to one of the "tigers", which was driven out of the hangar. We climbed into it, and I showed and explained everything to him. He grasped everything on the fly. Naturally, I got to know them well. He was a nice guy and did not pose as an officer. In fact, he was a merry fellow, and he had three girlfriends. As soon as he intended to visit one of them, he immediately inserted her portrait into a frame. One day one of them suddenly appeared. The situation was saved by a batman who detained the girl until the womanizer changed the framed photograph. For quick wits, the batman received an additional leave of absence.

As of | January 1944, the formation of the 101st battalion of heavy tanks of the Leibstandarte tank corps was as follows:

Officers Non-commissioned ,Private | Total

, officers ana E | 27 - 153 | 419 599 Actual number of EC 18 g 83 BE 365 466 | Deficiency 9 E 70 54 | 133

In mid-January 1944, the battalion, whose recruitment was never completed, was transferred from Germany to Belgium. From Paderborn, the shock battalion of the SS Panzer Corps was sent to the Belgian Mons. Actually, almost the entire personnel of the 101st heavy tank battalion was located three kilometers from Mons near the highway leading to Soigny. Along the road, several one-story cottages adjoining each other stood in even rows. In them and races

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February 1944. The commander of the 101st SS Panzer Battalion was SS-Sturmbannführer Heinz von Westernhagen.

tankers leaned in. At the disposal of the officers was a large building, which was located in the forest. Its squares allowed the officers to summon their spouses. Tanks and vehicles, hidden from British air reconnaissance, were located nearby in the forest, under the cover of tree branches. The 3rd company received seven new Tigers. At that time, it consisted of seventeen vehicles (four platoons of four tanks each and a company commander's tank). But in fact, Michael Wittmann's company ended up in Belgium much later.

On February 12, 1944, the first tankers from the Eastern Front began to arrive at the location of the 101st tank battalion. Sepp Dietrich himself was the first to visit here. Westernhagen, who was barely able to heal his wounds, was at that moment studying in Paris at the courses for commanders of tank battalions. In the battalion he led, he appeared on February 23, 1944

of the year.

It makes sense to say a few words about this tanker. In his autobiography, Heinz von Westernhagen

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described his fate: "I was born in Latvia, in Riga, on August 29, 1911. I was the fourth son of the dentist Carl Friedrich Max von Westernhagen and Hedwig Angelika von Westernhagen, nee Bertels. I was baptized in the Protestant manner with the name Heini Otto Alexander. In the winter of 1914/15, when my father returned from Siberia, we fled through Finland and Sweden to Germany. When Riga was taken by German troops in 1917, we immediately returned to this city. Then the Bolshevik revolution happened, and for the second time we lost everything we had. This time we were ruined by the Bolsheviks. In the summer of 1919, we left our solid home and, together with 3,000 German refugees, headed for Hamburg. In October 1921 my family ended up in Berlichin in Neumark. There I attended secondary school (I completed elementary school in Hamburg). I finished my schooling on March 25, 1927. After that, I went to Hamburg, from where I enlisted as a cabin boy on a sailing ship. I served on it until 1929. After that I tried to take up agriculture. Then I joined the NSDAP. However, at the beginning of 1930, I again went to sea. I went ashore in April 1932 and was unemployed until February 1933. After that I decided to join the newly formed SS in Hamburg. On February 15, 1933, I again left Hamburg as a sailor, staying at sea until November 20, 1933. I was forced to leave the ship, as the food was very bad on it. Between December 13, 1933 and October 1, 1934, I worked at the Phoenix Rubber Factory in Hamburg. Heinz von Westernhagen became a member of the General SS (Allgemeine SS) as early as April 1, 1932. He was enrolled in the 1st assault (battalion) of the 17th standard (regiment) of the SS.

Heinz von Westernhagen could not be denied his horizons. Sailing on ships, he saw most of the world, including distant continents, such as Australia. He even wrote several articles and stories about his sea adventures. Some of them were

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published in the German press. At first, he did not take his service in the SS very seriously, although he quickly climbed the stairs. | November 1933 he was awarded the rank of SS navigator, and | May 1934 - Rottenführer. At the end of the summer of that year, he became an Unterscharführer.

| October 1934 he was in the SS Regiment "Germany". For a number of reasons, it was preferred to immediately send him to the SS Junker School in Bad Tölz. He took preparatory courses here twice. However, his career began to develop a little differently than he expected. Since he often traveled abroad, he was assigned to serve in the SD - the security service, which was, in fact, the SS intelligence. As a result, he had to take new courses that were held in Berlin (Grunewald). On April 20, 1936, he was awarded the title of SS-Untersturmführer. Then von Westernhagen was transferred to "diplomatic" work. As an SS officer, he often had to go abroad. On September 13, 1937, he was awarded the next rank - he became an SS Obersturmführer.

In 1938, after the Anschluss, von Westernhagen was transferred to Austria. where he was entrusted with the command of the |-th company of the SS regiment "Germany". From here he was transferred to the Wehrmacht. From September 23 to December 21, 1938, he commanded a platoon of the 16th company of the 94th infantry regiment. But he was soon transferred to the Imperial Security Headquarters, where he almost immediately

SS-Sturmbannführer Heinz von Westernhagen in early 1944

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received the rank of SS-Hauptsturmführer. But he did not like detective work, for this reason, when the Second World War began, he asked to be transferred to combat units. Then von Westernhagen was transferred to the headquarters of the Leibstandarte. But already during the conquest of Holland, Belgium and France, he acted as a company commander. Despite all the protests, after the defeat of the Western powers by Germany, he was again transferred to the SD. March 14, 1941 Heinz von Westernhagen returns to the Leibstandarte. On May 13, 1941, he was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class for participation in the Balkan campaign. By the beginning of the German aggression against the USSR, von Westernhagen served as a special staff officer of the Leibstandarte. He took charge of the assault gun battalion after the Leibstandarte was sent to France for reorganization in 1942. On the very first day of the battle on the Kursk Bulge, he was seriously wounded in the head. When, after a long treatment, he nevertheless began to recover, he learned that he had been entrusted with a new mission - he was to command the 101st battalion of heavy tanks of the Leibstandarte corps, which was being formed.

The 13th company of heavy tanks began to arrive from the Eastern Front in Mons sometime in early March 1944. In the battalion that was being formed, the tankers were honored. On this occasion, even beer was allowed during the gala dinner. By that time, SS-Hauptsturmführer Kling was no longer a company commander. He is not

handed over the reins to Michael Wittmann. Myself

March 1, 1944. Wedding photo of Michael and Hilda Wittmann

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Kling took command of the 2nd battalion of the Leibstandarte Panzer Regiment. Contrary to the original plan, most of the tankers from the 13th heavy company moved to the 2nd company of the new tank battalion. Wittmann was left in command. But the famous tanker himself appeared in his company in those days very rarely. After Hitler handed him the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross, he was constantly on the move. It wasn't just about public speaking. Wittmann chose to spend part of his vacation with his fiancée, Hilda Burmester. He met a girl who was 19 years old in 1942. She accompanied him on all his trips. On March 1, 1944, Michael and Hilda were married in the chapel of the town hall of Lüneburg. Balthazar Woll acted as best man at the wedding. The wedding did not go unnoticed. So, for example, the newlyweds received a gift from the Fuhrer - it was a basket with 50 bottles of good wine. The local press did not stand aside either.

By the time of his marriage, Wittmann had become one of the most famous soldiers of the Third Reich. If he and his wife went to the city, they were immediately surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic youth who asked for an autograph as a keepsake. As soon as they entered the cafe, applause was arranged, and the owners insisted that all the treats would be at their expense. In the apartment of his parents, huge piles of letters accumulated, in which the Germans asked to send them a photo of a tanker with his autograph. In April 1944, Michael Wittmann was assigned to perform at the Henschel factory, where the Tiger had been developed. Gankist expressed his deep gratitude to the workers for producing such good tanks.

In the meantime, tireless training of new tankers was going on in Mons. Colonel-General Guderian insisted that Wittmann personally teach the "newcomers" the basics of tank battle tactics. The emphasis in his lectures should

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Speech at the Henschel plant (Kassel), which produced "tigers"

was to do on shooting at targets while moving. Indeed, Wittmann made an almost sensational statement - he argued that the weight of the "tiger" and its good maneuverability did not require a standard deceleration in order for the gunner-gunner to make an accurate shot.

On April 1, SS-Obersturmführer Michael Wittmann and other prominent guests hosted the parade of the Walloon SS Assault Brigade in Brussels. This SS unit, made up of Belgian volunteers, had just returned from the Eastern Front. The commander of this unit, Leon Degrelle, recalled: "Our column stretched for 17 kilometers. Our young Belgian Waffen-SS soldiers, in their gray field uniforms emblazoned with newly awarded decorations, looked proudly from their tank turrets at the jubilant masses. They deserved their Iron Crosses. But, on the other hand, the tanks that we use

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called in this parade weren't quite valid. We had to borrow in other parts, since we escaped from the Cherkasy pocket without equipment. Our assault brigade was still in the process of re-equipment."

Meanwhile, Michael Wittmann found himself back in his unit, or, as he liked to say, "at home." On April 21, 1944, he and his wife left Erbstorf and went to the battalion stationed in Belgium. They spent the night in a dormitory for soldiers, which was created specially in Brussels. The next morning, Wittmann was informed by telephone that the remnants of his 13th Panzer Company had reached the railway station at Mons. It was a tank platoon of his friend Wendorf, who, after Cherkassy, participated for some time in the battles near Kamenetz-Podolsk.

Wittmann and his wife immediately rushed to the railway station. There they met the echelon on which the last tanks arrived from the Eastern Front.

March 8, 1944 Wittmann attends tank courses in Fallingbommel

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cysts of the 13th tank company of the Leibstandarte. When the soldiers saw that their beloved commander was meeting them at the station, they were overjoyed. There was also a noisy reception. Wittmann and his wife were promptly brought hot food to the platform. Sitting on simple wicker baskets, all those present with pleasure ate peas from pots as a "festive meal".

and "Tiger" of the 2nd company of the 101st tank soup. But congratulations - the SS battalion is hiding in the forest that day for Wittmann was not over. The fact is that April 22, 1944 was the day of his thirtieth birthday.

In the meantime, the 101st tank battalion was moved from Mons to northern France, closer to the area

the alleged invasion of the Anglo-American allies. The battalion was temporarily located in the town of Gourne-en-Bre, which was located between Rouen and Beauvais. On the afternoon of April 23, 1944, Wittmann and his wife head to France by car to find a more suitable quartering. Several villages were suitable for this. But they had to be abandoned, since in their vicinity there was nowhere to hide rather bulky "tigers" from Anglo-American aircraft. As a result, Wittmann was forced to apply for

help to the mayor of one of the cities. Four kilometers from Gourne-en-Bré, Elbo Castle was found, the surrounding forest ideal for sheltering tanks. In addition, in the castle itself, except for the caretaker, who was also a gardener, there was no

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The castle in which the 3rd company of the 101st SS tank battalion was located

one soul. Wittmann decided to settle here. His wife found this place not just beautiful, but idyllic. The next day, preparations began for the arrival of the tank company. Wittmann's wife started the work first. his batman SS navigator Alfred Bernhard, "Bobby" Woll, non-commissioned officer Konrad and a pair of Ukrainian HE-Vs. The rest of the tank companies were also able to find suitable locations in the vicinity of Gourne en Bre. By that time, all tank companies were armed with fourteen "tigers", and the staffing of the company looked like this - 4 officers, 56 non-commissioned officers, 107 soldiers. Still, Wittmann's company was the luckiest of all - it was located in a three-story castle, covered with ivy to the very roof. Behind the building itself was a small lake framed by tall trees. In the middle of the lake there was an artificially created small island. Wittmann and his wife occupied one of the rooms on the second floor. All tankers lived in the castle. Outside the castle (in the gatehouse and in tents) lived only the soldiers of the company

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service. It seemed that on the eve of the next military nightmare, the tank crews got into a kind of fairy tale. In this castle there was one significant case, which characterizes Wittmann in the best possible way. Some of the soldiers from his company, who were at the disposal of the kitchen of the castle, offered their commander to receive freshly baked pies and coffee for breakfast. When to the question: "Will the whole company eat like this?" - he received a negative answer, then politely declined the proposal, saying that he would eat the same as all his soldiers.

If we talk about relations with the local population, the tankers have always tried to avoid excesses and behave correctly. One day a camera, which belonged to unknown owners, disappeared in the castle. Wittmann immediately lined up the whole company and gave a short lecture on the inviolability of other people's property and on the code of conduct for a Waffen-SS employee. He gave the remaining unknown thief a chance. An hour later, the camera stood in front of the door of Wittmann's room. But the lull was not long - there were bloody battles ahead in Normandy. The last echo of the calm days was a journal note that appeared on June 2, 1944, in which the author calculated that the six most successful crew commanders of the "Tigers" (Wittmann in the first place) in total during the fighting on the Eastern Front destroyed three Veteran tank brigades! The most surprising thing was that this was not an exaggeration.

## Chapter 8 VILLIERS-BOCAGE

On April 30, 1944, a message arrived at the headquarters of the 1st SS Panzer Corps. German intelligence discovered that the landing of the Anglo-American Allies in northern France was to take place in the first two weeks of June 1944. On June 1, 1944, special British radio signals were intercepted by German radio operators, which indicated that the invasion was to begin within the next 14 days. They were addressed to the French underground and resistance groups. On June 5, 1944, at 10:15 p.m., the nature of these signals changed, which could mean that the landing would begin in the next two days. However, at the headquarters



commanders in the West decided that an allied invasion during this period was unlikely. As a result, neither the 7th Army nor the 1st SS Panzer Corps were put on alert. Meanwhile, almost 6,500 landing craft were heading from Britain towards Northern France. British paratroopers began to land north of Caen as early as 015 hours on 6 June. But the German command again hesitated. As a result, the SS division "Hitler Youth" was put on alert only at 14:30 on June 6, 1944, when the allied invasion was in full swing.

If we talk about the 101st heavy tank battalion as a special tactical unit, then the situation looked

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June 1944. Tanks from Wittmann's company near Caen

in the following way. SS navigator Herbert Claude recalled the events of June 5, 1944: "It was the evening before the start of the invasion. We camped in a small village between Paris and Normandy. The 1st platoon provided security for Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich, who was quartered in a large country house. A shed was installed in front of the house, where we placed our radio center. I began to carry out the night watch, as the sky turned out to be filled with enemy bombers and fighters. The company itself was stationed in the village. On the eve of midnight, an order came: to strengthen the guard and destroy the enemy landing units. But so far it has been relatively quiet." The sleepy Dietrich was informed that something was wrong between 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning. He alerted his tank corps, but took no action. As a result of this delay, Field Marshal Rundstedt's headquarters lost the operational initiative. The 101st tank battalion advanced to the Allied landing site only at about 3 o'clock, but

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June 7, 1944. "Tiger" 131 is preparing for battle

chi June 7, that is, with a delay of almost a day! The "Tigers" rushed along the highway Yu 316 in the direction of the Seine. Around 10 o'clock, British bombers attacked a column of tanks of the 1st company of the 1091st battalion. Walter Lau recalled: "I found part of our route to Caen unusually interesting, since from August 1942 to January 1943 the Leibstandarte was being reorganized here as a tank division. As a gunner in one of the companies of the Leibstandarte, I traveled several times with trucks or by rail on supply business. For this reason, I knew quite well many of the local villages. But soon, in this familiar Norman landscape, blood was to be shed, including my own. The war has begun again for us in Dre. At the exit from one village we were attacked by dive bombers. The first to be killed on the Normandy front was SS Unter-Scharführer Kleber. Posthumously, Michael Wittmann gave him the rank of Oberscharführer. Even in the East, he appreciated him as a very capable commander of a tank crew. We called him "Quax the Unlucky Pilot". With it

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Since then, enemy planes have never lost sight of us. The commanders of the tank crews gave the order to install machine guns on the tank turrets. I remember how Bobby Warmbrunn was shooting at the plane as if he had lost his mind when one of them began to come at us right on highway".

Warmbrunn himself recalled the following: "In the Forest of Versailles, our tanks came under carpet bombardment. Like many other crews, I climbed into the tank in the hope of surviving this hell. When composure returned to us, we continued our movement towards the front. About thirty dive bombers and attack aircraft constantly tried to attack us. One of them was hit by me with a machine gun. During the journey, we constantly had to stop to make urgent repairs." Wittmann's company was attacked from the air 10

June 1944, when she was moving towards Falaise. In order not to stop traffic, but also not to become easy prey for the British, the "tigers" increased the interval between cars. Despite the extreme danger, all the tank commanders did not take cover in the vehicles. All of them continued to be on the tower and fired from machine guns. One of the planes was hit and crashed somewhere nearby. As a result, the rest of the English pilots decided to turn back. Walter Lau recalled the subsequent events: "The 2nd company had to repeatedly take cover on country roads. As a result, we marched along the Falaise-Kahn highway in a formation in which an interval of more than a hundred meters was observed between the tanks. It was dark when we reached Falaise. There we met with the first units of the Hitler Youth division.

The forces of the opponents moved towards each other. On June 12, 1944, the British 2nd Army tried to break through the German defense line at the junction of the tank training and 352nd Infantry Divisions. A report from the 22nd Brigade of the British 7th Panzer Division stated: "Because of the difficult terrain and as a result

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Wittmann's company moves along highway number 316. The large distance between the cars is clearly visible, which should have reduced losses from American bombing

slow advance, it was decided that the 7th Panzer Division should outflank the German Panzer Training Division. The Americans withdrew from these positions. At the moment, they are located north of Caumont, which provides an excellent opportunity to advance in the direction of Villiers-Bocage. At that time, the British 7th Panzer Division was one of Her Majesty's best units. She had already encountered the Germans in Africa and Italy. In fact, it was the only British formation that was fully equipped with powerful Cromwell and Sherman tanks. During this offensive, the German tank training division was in great danger. The advance of the British forward could upset all the battle formations of the 1st SS Panzer Corps, which at that moment included the training division. The British took into account all the factors, except for one - Michael Wittmann, whom they called in radio negotiations nothing more than a "bloody dog".

On the night of June 12, 1944, the 2nd company, commanded by Michael Wittmann, was placed on the left flank of the SS Panzer Corps. At that moment, Wittmann had only six Tigers at his disposal, the rest

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These eight were repaired after a long and difficult march, accompanied by constant raids. The "Tigers" were carefully hidden, but the aimed artillery fire that began prompted an experienced tanker that their location was known. As a result, during the night, the remnants of Wittmann's company changed their positions three times in the hope of confusing the British. As a result, the "tigers" stopped at a hill just south of highway No. 175. The 1st company of the 101st battalion was located much to the east. After a five-day march through France, the tankers were never given the opportunity to rest for at least a few hours.

Walter Lau wrote after the war: "On June 2, 1944, five or six Tigers from our company, commanded by Wittmann, were heading from Eversy along the Villiers-Bocage-Caen highway. We stopped about two kilometers from Villiers-Bocage on a secondary road. which ran parallel to the national highway. We saw her from a distance of 100 meters. My tank, commanded by Unterscharführer Stif, was the last one in this

Kahn has become a difficult task for the Leibstandarte

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okay. We fell behind because our engine broke down. As a result, every few kilometers we were forced to stop in order to restart our engine... After

darkness fell, Wittmann returned, who drove around the neighborhood in an amphibious car. His intention was to bring up the remaining units. We spent a very restless night during which we came under fire several times." Wittmann himself wrote in those hours: "I received an order to stay somewhat away from Weller and destroy the maximum number of enemy tanks from the northeast and northwest."

At about 5 am on June 13, 1944, the battle group of the British 7th Panzer Division began its offensive. Before reaching Villiers-Bocage, the British had no fire contact with the Germans. The same picture was observed in the French city itself. The only units that at that time were in Villiers-Bocage were two sanitary companies of the training tank division, which managed to leave THEIR POSITIONS in time.

Meanwhile, Wittmann's "tigers" after a stormy and restless night were preparing to fight a little further down the highway. At 8 o'clock in the morning, Wittmann summoned the commanders of tank crews: Untersturmführer Hantush, Unterscharführers Stif and Owl, Oberscharführer Brandt and Lötsch. The latter was slightly wounded. At the same time, the tank of Obersturmführer Ve-"Tigers" in the Norman town of mudflow departed to install

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to establish contact with neighboring German units and receive appropriate orders from headquarters. Wittmann himself described the subsequent events as follows: "I was at my command post and did not even allow the thought that the enemy could suddenly attack. I sent one of my officers to establish contact with headquarters. We turned around and waited for his return with the news. Suddenly they came up to me and said: "Obersturmführer, tanks are moving past us along the highway. They have a peculiar round shape and I don't think they are German." I immediately went outside and saw tanks driving at a distance of 150-200 meters. They were the British and the Americans. At the same moment, I noticed that the tanks were escorted by armored personnel carriers.

What Wittmann saw was an almost complete panzer regiment advancing from Villiers Bocage. The German tanker himself did not yet know the general situation on this sector of the front. As if spellbound, he watched the long column of Cromwells and Shermans. This power rolled in the direction of Kahn. "It was a whole tank regiment, which, to be honest, took me by surprise," he later recalled. Wittmann immediately tried to assess the situation dispassionately. This took a few seconds. What options did he have? He could stay in cover, report on the advancing Allied troops by radio, and call for reinforcements. But in this case, Wittmann would not be Wittmann. He decided to attack with his one and only tank. He was well aware that under normal conditions he had no chance against this steel armada. Retreat, once he had launched an attack, was impossible. In fact, he had to go to certain death. "I must say that the decision was not easy. Never before have I faced such an imposing enemy force." But at the same time, Wittmann knew that on the way to Kahn these tanks

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will not encounter any serious obstacles. He was supposed to prevent the collapse in this sector of the front. Wittmann tried the impossible. He rushed to the "tigers", which were standing a little way from the road in a shelter.

Lau described this EPISODE as follows: "It was morning. Artillery fire became sti- Morning June 7, 1944. 101st tank hat. I was on duty, standing on the SS battalion moving towards the tank turret. Everything else for the Allies who landed in Normandy happened very badly.

endearingly. Between 5 and 7 o'clock in the morning Obersturmführer Wittmann appeared and jumped into the first of our tanks. On the way, he managed to grab my elbow and shout something about Tommy. He waved his hand in the direction of the track, which from our shelter could not be seen because of the dense bushes. I immediately took the place of the gunner. The mechanic started the engine. We

I immediately put on my headphones. Unterscharführer Stif, who was dozing in the place of the loader, received an order to put the rest of the tanks on alert. We moved along the country road in the direction of the highway. We drove about 20 meters when it became clear that our engine was out of order. We explained this to Wittmann. He immediately jumped out of the tank and boarded Unterscharführer Owl's Tiger.

Wittmann himself described his actions as follows: "I did not have time to gather my entire company. I had to act extremely quickly, as I assumed that the enemy had already calculated me. With one tank, I moved forward, having managed to convey the order to the rest, so that they would hold their positions and not think of retreating. I am ustre

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I took pity on the English, who were quite surprised at my appearance. First, I knocked out two tanks to the right of the column, then one to the left, after which I turned left and crashed into a battalion of armored personnel carriers, which was located in the very center of the tank regiment. I moved along the highway to the end of the column, destroying every tank that came my way. The enemy was in a panic. Then I moved to the very center of the city of Villiers, where I was hit by an anti-tank gun. My tank was hit. Not giving in to panic, I began to shoot everything that was around me. I lost radio communications, and therefore could not call my company to me. And our tanks were out of my field of vision. I then decided to leave the tank. We didn't blow it up because I thought we'd be back. We only took with us weapons that we could carry on ourselves." In these concise and very brief words, Wittmann described his unprecedented bold attack by one tank on an entire British tank brigade. Almost the entire tank column on the road leading to Caen was destroyed. Never before in the history of warfare has such a bold deed been crowned with such an astonishing moustache.

Tankers are joking. In black uniform - Michael Wittmann

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foot. At the same time, the leading SS navigator Boldt had to work on the verge of human capabilities. He loaded shells with amazing speed. After the fight, driver-mechanic Walter Müller will say, "I was just driving." It seems very simple, but the crews of the English Cromwells were also on the alert. They also fired like a hurricane, not stopping it for a second. The hostages of the situation turned out to be English infantrymen who were riding in armored personnel carriers. They couldn't help it.

And here is how the English historian Max Hastings described these events: "Attacking stationary targets, he sent projectile after projectile at tanks and armored vehicles to drink point-blank, from the closest distances, and in the end rammed another Cromwell, knocking it to the ground. side, because he was blocking his entrance to the main street of Villiers-Bocage. There he destroyed three more tanks, the fourth tank remained undamaged, as the driver took him backwards into the garden, unable to open fire on the "tiger" due to the fact that the tank gunner remained outside the vehicle ... Gunner Tank Sergeant Lockwood fired four 17-pound shells at the Tiger. One of them hit the side of the tank and smoke appeared above it, and then flames. Then came the retaliatory shot of the "tiger", which brought down half of the building on the "Sherman" and completely filled it up. While the British were freeing their car from the rubble, the Germans disappeared. Having received only minor damage, the "Tiger" destroyed the last "Cromwell" before leaving the battlefield.

When Wittmann, with the crew of a wrecked tank, managed to break out of the city, he immediately rushed north to the headquarters of the training division of the 1st SS Panzer Corps. There he reported the dangerous situation to Lieutenant Colonel Kaufman, urging him to urgently mobilize forces to strike at Villiers-Bocage. At the same time, Wittmann informs the command of the 1st Panzer

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SS Corps. But at that moment, almost all units of the Hitler Youth division were near Kahn. In addition, the tank training division itself was involved in the battles near Tilly-sur-Selle, and therefore it did not have at its disposal a sufficient number of free units to send them to Villiers-Bocage and thereby eliminate the threat of breaking through the line front.

In the Villiers-Bocage area, one of the battalions of the tank training regiment was deployed, which, after the death of Major Prince Schönburg-Waldenburg, was commanded by Captain Ritgen. Ritgen also managed to withdraw individual units from the front. However, it wasn't easy. In total, a battle group was formed, consisting of fifteen tanks of the RU type.

Captain Helmut Ritgen himself recalled that day: "The command of the division ordered me to block the sulfur approaches to Villiers-Bocage and prepare for a counterattack, which was supposed to prevent the penetration of the British through Villiers-Bocage far to the east." However, this sortie was not very successful. German tanks came under fire from well-camouflaged British anti-tank guns. Without the support of either artillery or panzergrenadiers, the further advance of German tanks along the hedgerows that abounded in these regions was sheer madness.

At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Kaufman was assembling a new battle group, which was supposed to change the situation in Villiers-Bocage. Wittmann himself did not take part in this, he urgently jumped into the car and sped away in the direction of highway No. 175. Hans Bernhard, who happened to be in those parts, recalled: technology. These tanks, knocked out by our "tigers", were moving in an easterly direction. In front of the bushes near Villiers-Bocage I noticed two "tigers". One of them was almost knocked out. But eki

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the page was still in it. Some of its members were wounded, some, unfortunately, were killed. We stopped for a while to look around. After that, we slowly moved towards the Villiers-Bocage bush. A few meters later we were at a crossroads. When our first tank reached this intersection of streets, it came under fire from an anti-tank gun that was somewhere to the left. You couldn't see him until you were all the way to the intersection. The first tank was out of action. The same thing happened with the second tank. The third tank was able to get out of the line of fire. We, who were in the fourth tank, were ordered to close the hatches and turn right. There we were overtaken by a group of two or three Tigers. These "tigers" rushed to the crossroads and immediately destroyed the anti-tank gun. It seems to me that one of the "tigers" was shot down in a firefight, but I'm not sure. Later there was talk that the "tiger" simply moved and crushed the enemy's anti-tank gun. But all this happened very quickly. All these actions took just a few minutes."

"food. And 2` No. ... Leibstandarte units enter Villiers-Bocage

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Leibstandarte units enter Villiers-Bocage (footage from the chronicle)

The "tigers" mentioned were from the 1st company of the 101st SS tank battalion. In addition to his own tank, the commander of this company, SS Hauptsturmführer Möbius, sent the tanks of the following commanders to Villiers-Bocage: Obersturmführer Philipsen, Oberscharführers Bode, Saener, Svoboda and Ernst, as well as Untersturmführers Lucasius and Khan. These "tigers" headed for Villiers-Bocage as soon as the alarm was announced. The departure was carried out in a terrible hurry.

Hauptsturmführer Möbius recalled that attack: "An urgent order came through: "The enemy broke through somewhere. Urgently take a company and stop him." I ran into Wittmann near Hill 213. He gave urgent instructions. I deployed two platoons at Villiers-Bocage so that the enemy could not radically change the situation. The British were not supposed to break through to the east to Caen. With the forces of one platoon, I entered the city. I didn't have the slightest idea what kind of power the British had."

And what was happening with the 2nd tank company of the 101st battalion at that time? After Wittmann

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took the tank of Unterscharführer Owl, part of this crew had to stay at height 213, which adjoined the route. Rottenführer Lau described what happened next: "The British tanks were moving in the direction of Caen past me on the right side. Then I heard the sound of a gunshot. It was Wittmann who fired. I stood on the turret of a tank that was left without a commander. The car was located somewhere 150 meters from the highway. The Unterscharführer remained in the open air, where Wittmann had stopped. Over the noise of gunfire and the roar of engines, I shout to him: "Kurt, come here! I don't have a commander." Under the command of the Owl, we continued to move towards the track. The left side of the road was one mangled and smoking iron. The smoke was so strong that it was difficult to make out the path through it. On the right lane of the highway leading to Caen, we found two intact Cromwell tanks. They started to turn the towers, but we destroyed them. Frightened Englishmen rushed about everywhere. Slowly we retreated in the direction of our country road in order to have a better view and be able to restart our constantly broken engine. There we found individual vehicles of our battalion and proceeded to take the British prisoner. The Russian "hi-vi" was especially distinguished in this matter. He was a member of the T-34 crew, which we knocked out near Cherkassy. With a pistol in one hand and a whip in the other, he began to drive the English out of the surrounding bushes. We soon rounded up over a hundred captured Tommys, who were herded into a barn next to our tank. We took away their weapons. We installed a machine gun on the tank turret. Thirty or forty minutes passed, as we noticed the "tigers" rolling past us from Caen. They aimed in the direction of Villiers-Bocage. I memorized their numbers — 111, 112, 121, 131. They were tanks from the 1st company of our battalion."

In this battle, Oberscharführer Jurgen Brandt from the Wittmann company destroyed two Shermans on the highway.  
and many

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Sappers of the 101st tank battalion in Villiers-Bocage

the gesture of armored personnel carriers. After that, his crew took eighty British prisoners. Other crews also succeeded in this matter - they took another 160 British soldiers as prisoners of war! Soon the combat group of the tank training division joined the "tigers" of the 2nd company. The situation was turned upside down. Let us dwell on the actions of the 1st tank company of the 101st battalion. Tankers from its composition met Wittmann on the highway and received rough instructions. He could not give direct orders, because he did not know how events developed in the vicinity of Villiers-Bocage. From Hill 213, Wittmann could only see numerous smoking tanks from the British 22nd Tank Brigade. The first four "tigers" from the 1st company moved up to the bushes of Villiers-Bocage. At the head of the advancing tanks was the crew of Obersturmführer Philipsen. By this time, the British abandoned the idea of breaking through to Caen and took up a dead defensive on the streets of Villiers-Bocage. In many places they disguised

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Sherman tanks and anti-tank guns. Several British tanks tried to break out of the city, but ran into the "Tigers" and were immediately destroyed. Then the tank platoon commanded by Philipsen went on the attack. Walter Hahn described this attack as follows: "Gannes had an excellent opportunity to achieve significant success in our first battle on the Western Front. On June 13, he led the attack on Villiers-Bocage. In battle, he destroyed eight tanks and columns of the enemy, which finally thwarted his strategic plans. When he entered a well-fortified city, his tank was hit at close range. Gannes was able to get out of the burning tank unharmed and immediately boarded another vehicle, after which he continued to participate in the battle."

Such an attack was very risky, since in the narrow streets, deprived of infantry support, German tanks could become an easy victim for the British. Part of the 1st company was moving along the bushes, where several RU tanks from the training division had already taken up positions. The city has turned into something terrible. Above him flew the endless roar of engines and the roar of gun shots. Inside the city, the "tigers" could not use their natural advantage. Quite often, anti-tank guns were aimed at tanks from cellars and windows of houses. Having fallen into one of these ambushes, the "tiger" of Heinrich Ernst was shot down, the tank commander himself died. The anti-tank gun mentioned above, from which several RUs were knocked out, was silenced for Wittmann after the battle on June 13, 1944, only

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when the "tiger" with tail number 112 (Unterscharführer Kap) rammed a neighboring house and crushed it along with the calculation. As a result, a certain tactical error was made. Instead of attacking along the main street, the "tigers" moved along parallel streets in a southerly direction. As a result, all three "tigers" were hit.

After that, the battle was continued only by the "tigers", which remained near the bushes of Villiers-Bocage. "There was shooting everywhere. We had to fight against infantry and anti-tank guns. On that day, I spotted Untersturmführer Lucasius' "tiger", which was hit at very close range. The crew commander himself was wounded. His burns looked terrible, "the commander of the "tiger" 132 Unterscharführer Wendt recalled about this day. By the evening of this difficult day, the English troops preferred to leave the city. The English advance was stopped, but it cost the 101st Battalion very dearly. For the first time in all the battles, the tankers of the Leibstandarte corps suffered such heavy losses. Six "tigers" were hit, several officers and non-commissioned officers were killed, many were wounded. But in any case, powerful British forces were prevented from reaching the rear of the 1st SS Panzer Corps. Wittmann, who single-handedly attacked an entire tank brigade, instantly became almost a national hero.

Already at the end of the day, Wittmann, right in the open air, told the officers of the headquarters of the SS Panzer Corps about the events that had taken place. The adjutant of the commander of the 1st Panzer Corps, Sepp Dietrich, SS-Hauptsturmführer Hermann Weiser took out a bottle of champagne from somewhere. It was supposed to celebrate the phenomenal tactical success of Michael Wittmann. By this time, it was already known that Dietrich had sent to Berlin an idea to award Wittmann the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords. The following was written in the submission: "Obersturmführer

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On June 13, 1944, SS Wittmann received an order to secure the left flank of the corps near Villiers-Bocage, since it was necessary to take into account the possibility of attacks by the penetrating British armored forces in the direction to the south and southeast. There was no support from the motorized infantry. Wittmann arrived at the appointed time, with six REG tanks under his command.

On the night of June 12-13, 1944, Wittmann's company had to change its combat position three times due to the strongest artillery fire. Early in the morning of June 13, 1944, he took up position at point 213 northeast of Villiers-Bocage, with 5 combat-ready tanks.

At 0800, the outpost reported to SS-Obersturmführer Wittmann that a large column of enemy tanks was marching along the Caen-Villiers-Bocage highway.

Wittmann, who was in hiding with his car, 200 meters south of the highway, discovered an English tank unit escorted by an English armored battalion in armored personnel carriers. The situation called for immediate action. Wittmann could not give an order to his people, who were outside the combat vehicles, dismounted, and on his tank, firing on the move, broke into the marching formations of the English column. As a result of this rapid

maneuver column was first dismembered. From a distance of 80 m, Wittmann destroyed three Sherman tanks. Then, following along the column in the direction of its route from a range of 10 to 30 m, he knocked out 15 enemy heavy tanks in a very short period of time. Then - another 6 tanks, the crews of which were forced to leave their combat vehicles. The escort battalion was almost completely destroyed. The crews of 4 tanks following Wittmann's car captured 230 people. Wittmann, far ahead of his company, continued the attack and entered the village of Villiers-Bocage. In the center of his tank was stopped by a heavy anti-tank gun.

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Sepp Dietrich, commander of the SS Panzer Corps, congratulates Wittmann on his phenomenal success in Villiers-Bocage

guns and could not move on. Despite this, in the reach of his airborne combat assets, he managed to destroy all enemy vehicles and disperse his military unit. Then Wittmann and his crew left their combat vehicle and, having walked 15 km to the north, went to the location of the tank training division. Wittmann reported there to the Chief of the Operations Department of the Headquarters, then, having taken 15 RU tanks from the training tank division under his command, returned back and struck again in the direction of Villiers-Bocage. Transferring to his Volkswagen amphibious vehicle that had made its way to him, he broke through to the 1st company, which was moving along the main highway to Villiers-Bocage, and threw it at the enemy, who, according to him, was still in the settlement and had in his tanks and anti-tank weapons at their disposal.

Thanks to his decisive actions, Wittmann was able to destroy the enemy forces deep in the rear of his own front (one powerful assault column), which was marching, with one of his tanks, and as a result of his personal decision, having shown the highest personal courage, to prevent a grave danger, threatening the entire front of the 1st SS Panzer Corps. At that time, the corps did not have any reserves.

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To date, Wittmann and his crew have brought the number of knocked out enemy tanks to 138 and the number of destroyed anti-tank guns to 132.

Dietrich, SS Obergruppenführer, General of the SS Panzer Troops.

However, after the fight, Wittmann was barely on his feet. Nothing could hide his mortal weariness. However, he was not allowed to rest immediately. Almost immediately after the battle at Villiers-Bocage, he had to give interviews for German radio, and then talk with numerous war correspondents. Only after this procedure did he go back to his company. Almost immediately he went to bed. In his part, he did not stay long, ten days after another legendary battle, he had to leave Normandy and head to Germany. On June 25, 1944, he met Hitler for the second time. This time the awarding took place in the Berghof, the Fuhrer's mountain residence. He became the 71st German officer to be awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords. At the same time, he was the first of the military to receive

A sip of champagne after a successful fight

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Sepp Dietrich learns from Wittmann the details of the battle. On the right is SS-Hauptsturmführer Weiser.

such a high award for fighting on the Western Front. Michael Wittmann was at the height of his fame. For some six months, he was awarded first the Knight's Cross, then the Oak Leaves to him, and finally, the Knight's Swords. During the same period he



rose through the ranks from the rank of Untersturmführer to Hauptsturmführer (the new SS rank was awarded to him simultaneously with the presentation of the award). With 138 destroyed tanks and 132 destroyed anti-tank guns to his credit, Wittmann became a truly unique soldier. After the official award procedure, Hitler and Wittmann had a very long conversation. The Führer was interested in the situation on the Western Front. At the same time, he expressed his intention not to let the tanker into the combat zone anymore. Hitler wanted Wittmann to become a teacher at one of the tank schools, where he could share his wealth of experience with officer candidates. Wittmann had to make a lot of efforts to achieve his return to the front. This happened on July 6, 1944. Until his death, he remained

month.

#### Chapter 9 FIGHTS OF UCAN

The Allied advance west of Caen began on 4 July 1944. Carpicket was an important strategic object, as numerous airfields were located there. By 18 o'clock after the bloody battle, the Germans, having suffered huge losses, left this airfield. About 60 Canadian tanks entered the Carpicket. It was decided by the forces of the 1st SS Panzer Corps to launch a counterattack. During the night, the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment "Leibstandarte" repeatedly attacked the Canadians, but their defenses could not be broken through. The Canadians managed to push a little only closer to the morning. The airfield remained in the hands of the Germans only thanks to the incredible efforts of several tanks from the SS division "Hitler Youth". As a result, the advance of the Canadians in this direction was temporarily stopped. But this did not deprive them of the opportunity to continue the offensive in the main strategic direction - on Kan. On the evening of July 7, 1944, 467 British and American bombers bombed the positions held by the Hitler Youth division. It is significant that in the course of this terrible bombardment the civilian population suffered the most. It is estimated that about 400 civilians were killed. At the same time, the losses in the German units turned out to be surprisingly small.

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The general Allied offensive on Caen began at 04:20 on July 8, 1944. The main blow was to be taken by the panzergrenadiers from the 25th SS regiment. The superior forces of the Allies took Grouchy, Galmanche, Bourault and Saint-Comte almost immediately. With the permission of the command of the 1st SS Panzer Corps, the SS division "Hitler Youth" during the night began to evacuate its units from the Kan "MR" 133 on the streets of the French

township (Fritz Sahner) bridgehead. Through the ruined city, they left in a southerly direction to the Orne.

Michael Wittmann returned to the 101st Panzer Battalion after receiving the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords at the Führer's country residence. His vacation was very short. The appearance of the famous tanker in his native part was met with enthusiasm. Rumors have already reached many that Wittmann will not return to the front and will be a teacher at an officer school for tankers. In addition, the owners of such high awards were not supposed to directly participate in hostilities. The appearance of Wittmann further strengthened his already considerable authority. For Michael himself, this step was taken for granted. He was a true soldier and did not want to be a teacher. Moreover, he ignored Hitler's ban on participation in tank battles. Such was Wittmann, it would not have occurred to him to hide behind the backs of his comrades when they went into battle.

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One of the first to see him was SS Rottenführer Lau: "Once in the forest near Grimbose, I went to the field kitchen to get some coffee. During this short walk I met Michael Wittmann. I greeted him: "Obersturmführer, congratulations on the swords." He smiled back and said thank you. We went with him to the field kitchen. I passed

about a hundred meters, as he noticed that another gap appeared on his buttonhole. I apologized for addressing him incorrectly and congratulated him on receiving the rank of Hauptsturmführer. He smiled again and said something like: "It was a surprise for me myself." That's how he was our Michel. I did not fail to ask him about Hitler. Michel said that the Führer was talking about a new weapon that should stop the enemy advance. When we reached the kitchen, two more of our comrades joined us there, who immediately began to joyfully congratulate his".

Despite the fact that Michael Wittmann was one of the most eminent soldiers of the Reich and one of the few awarded the Swords to the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, this did not affect his demeanor in any way. He remained the same person as a couple of years ago, for which he was much loved by his colleagues. Among his colleagues was 19-year-old Hubert Heil, a radio operator from the 2nd company of the 101st tank battalion, who first met Wittmann on the Eastern Front. He well described the nature of the "Wittmann myth" that arose at the end of the war among soldiers and junior officers. "He was like a father to me. He completely won my trust due to his courage, kindness and humane behavior. Even after he received the Oak Leaves for the Knight's Cross, he did not disdain to take a sledgehammer in his hands and hammer the rods into the tracks of the tank with it. He never put himself above others, despite the fact that he was the most successful tanker of the Second World War. The life of such an image soldier, a good comrade-in-arms, must not be forgotten."

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As before, Wittmann's appearance was quite modest. He wore his usual black jacket, which in essence was clothing for technical personnel. From time to time he donned the simple blue trousers that were meant for repairmen. Michael Wittmann may have been the only officer who wore the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords on the pro-Westernhagen, which was in the role of a tanker's oiled and hai-stained jacket.

By July 1944, it was clear that Obersturmbannführer von Westernhagen had never healed his head wound. More and more often he suffered from severe pain and could hardly cope with the tasks assigned to him. He almost lost sleep and appetite. Sometimes his memory failed him. He himself wrote about this: "During the entire invasion, there was not a single day and night, so I could accurately name the number. I only remembered cities and specific battles."

As a result, on July 10, 1944, Michael Wittmann assumed command of the 101st heavy tank battalion. At the head of this tactical unity stood a man who was called none other than the "King of Tigers." His abilities and merits were known not only to colleagues, but also to opponents. Around Wittmann shone a kind of halo of the "invincible tanker". But now he had to take on new functions. Instead of breaking into the tank columns of the British and Canadians on your "tiger", destroying their tanks one by one

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Gym, he had to devote himself entirely to the planning of tactical operations. But at the same time, he did not refuse to participate in the battles. At every opportunity he tried to accompany his people.

When Wittmann stood at the head of the battalion, fierce fighting was going on at Malto and Etherville. If we talk about the battle formations of the Germans, then the following should be noted. The 3rd Battalion of the 1st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the "Leibstandarte" fought near Malto. The 11th company, commanded by Obersturmführer Frank Hasse, took the main blow. Actually it was a reserve company. But massive bombardments and artillery shelling led to the fact that the advanced units at Malto and Etherville were almost completely destroyed. Seeing that the Allied tanks were in danger of pinching the entire regiment, Hasse decided to act on his own. Ignoring all incoming orders, he entered Malto, already occupied by Canadians, with

east. In the course of a desperate attack, the Germans were able to break through the entire village. This rather depleted company managed to hold Malto until the moment when reinforcements arrived in the form of several "tigers" and another company of panzergoenaders.

On July 11, 1944, the Leibstandarte division took up positions previously held by the Hitler Youth division. Only a battalion of panzergrenadiers and artillery units were left at the front. The rest of the "Hitler Youth" were assigned to the rear for rest and replenishment. At the same time, several "tigers" moving west of the Orne reached the town of Baron. SS-Untersturmführer Kalinowski, who was adjutant to the battalion commander, recalled: "Wittmann led the battalion into battle, which had just pushed the Tommy back to their original positions. It was a fierce battle. I myself knew about this because the earth trembled from numerous explosions of shells.

When Wittmann stood at the head of the battalion, the first thing

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Colleagues on the "Leibstandarte" congratulate Wittmann

What he did was call his old friend Helmut "Axel" Wendorff. He gave him command of the 2nd tank company of the 101st battalion, as he knew that Wendorf was one of the most experienced tankmen. Wendorff became the commander of a tank company, which Wittmann himself had recently led, on July 15, 1944. Walter Lau recalled his return: "His return was a joyful event for all of us. I remember this episode very well. We were in Normandy when a man appeared a hundred meters behind our tanks. It approached quickly and we saw that it was our Bubi. I remember how he got on the tank, and it became clear to everyone that Bubi Wendorf was our new company commander." But at the same time, everyone regretted that Wittmann himself ended up on staff work. Hauptscharführer Georg Konrad wrote the following lines in a letter to Frau Wittmann: "When your husband took command of the battalion, we were inconsolable. We knew that our commander was leaving. He grew up with us. I want to say that we have developed a unique relationship with our commander.

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At first, we did not feel his disappearance, as we received in return Obersturmführer Wendorff, one of your husband's most talented friends. But in the end, the battalion achieved unprecedented results." Wittmann, who knew the winning sides and advantages of the "tigers", tried to prevent their scattered use. They had to be used as an armored fist.

Walter Lau described the events of July 1944 as follows: "After Hauptsturmführer Wittmann was placed in command of the 101st SS Panzer Battalion, Obersturmführer Wendorff arrived as a company commander. Even during the winter battles of 1944, he was appointed adjutant commander of the 2nd battalion of the 1st tank regiment of the Leibstandarte. We are pleased with this appointment, since Wendorff and Wittmann were not only friends, but also the most successful tankmen of the Leibstandarte. They have been together since the very moment a special tank company was formed from the "tigers" in the fall of 1942. We were proud of our crew: I was an artillery gunner, Franz Elmer was a driver, Hubert Heil was a radio operator. Somewhere in the middle of July, there were several quiet days. They did not go to any comparison with the first weeks of August, when we constantly had to take part in the battles. Two or three Tigers were on the front lines near Hill 112, a few kilometers south of Bretteville-sur-Odon. In those days we were the reserve of the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitler Youth". During the day we were in full readiness in the forest zone not far from the positions occupied by the artillerymen. Almost daily, we went to the headquarters of the artillerymen to receive further orders from the command of the Hitler Youth division.

One evening we were returning from the front line to Hill 112 near Bretteville-sur-Odon when we noticed a large village - Le Mesnil. That same evening, the Untersturm Fuhrer from the division

The Hitler Youth approached our

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tanks and rose to the armor. We learned that he held the line in this village with literally a dozen panzergrenadiers. Our grenadiers held the left side of the village, and the tommies occupied the right side. He told us that the Tommy greatly outnumbered them, and that the grenadiers were running out of ammunition and grenades. He asked us to help them out.

We started the next day. According to the plan worked out, we stopped a thousand meters from the village. At that moment, the Untersturmführer appeared with his grenadiers. He was unspeakably happy when we handed them some grenades and a bag of machine gun rounds. In the course of the conversation, Obersturmführer Wendorf and an Untersturmführer, whose name was unknown to me, figured out how to drive the dug-in Tommy out of the right side of the village. Wendorff ordered the loaders to prepare twenty high-explosive shells with delayed action fuses. The tanks were supposed to open fire on a special radio signal. In no case should the gunners endanger a small group of grenadiers from the Hitler Youth during the fire. We approached the village at a distance of about 400 meters. After that, the Untersturmführer launched a rocket. An order was heard on the radio: "Prepare to shoot." Some time passed and there was a "Fire" Our two "tigers" began to bombard the part of the village where the Tommys settled with shells. Unfortunately, we do not know how this day ended for a handful of brave grenadiers, nor how much we were able to help them hold the village. A few days later, we learned from grenadiers from the same Hitler Youth regiment that these brave guys fought to the last bullet. According to unverified information, none of them survived.

But in those conditions, the British and American aircraft, which actually dominated the skies over Normandy, were of particular concern to the tankers. The same Lau recalled: "For a long time in our front

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there were only three of our "tigers". Sometimes we patrolled several hundred meters behind the front line. And once, enemy attack aircraft emerged at us like hawks from the sky. We were completely defenseless. All we could do was close the hatches, run our cars at full speed, and brake hard when the bomb was thrown at us. It was the most terrible and dangerous raid we have ever come across in Normandy. It is impossible to describe the feeling when a falling bomb raises the ground and our tank shakes so that the shock absorbers can hardly withstand it. But we used our chance - none of the three tanks was damaged. Then, when Bubi Wendorf was looking at the craters around our tanks, he jokingly said: "They should be deprived of their flying license. They could not hit us from such a low altitude, with absolutely clear skies, when we were in their sight, as if on a silver platter. We analyzed what had happened and came to the conclusion that there were two possibilities to hide from the attack of attack aircraft and dive bombers. Firstly, if the situation allows you to get as close as possible to the enemy's line of defense. It was said that this recipe was invented by "Tank"-Mayer himself. Secondly, it was necessary to stop, open all the hatches wide open, turn the turret at 9 o'clock and tilt the gun so that it almost touches the ground. In those days we tried this trick with Wendorf more than once. The enemy pilots thought we were already a wrecked tank."

On July 15, 1944, Untersturmführer Eduard Kalinowski wrote to his wife: "...our commander von Westernhagen had to leave us – he was sent to the Reich hospital. Michel is in command of our battalion until further notice. While others are fighting on the front lines, I am stuck in headquarters, from which I very rarely get out. There is a lot of work that I do not have time to cope with during the day, so I have to do it even at night. Michel returned from the Führer's Headquarters last week and brought us a lot of news that us

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Fearing allied air raids, the "tigers" constantly camouflaged

are rare. We know almost nothing about what is going on around us. Also last week I was awarded a silver badge "For wounds". After returning to the battalion, I was awarded the Iron Cross, first class... The soldiers here have a hard time. The British and Americans use a huge amount of technology. Air raid - there is no end. However, in recent days they have become less. Now it is our turn to build hell for them. Their supply has reached the limit, so our chances are approximately equal ... We have no problems with food and water. There are a lot of livestock left everywhere."

On July 14, 1944, Wittmann ordered his friend Wendorff to take three "tigers" from the 2nd company and organize a raid on British tanks in the Malto area. The division headquarters received information that a dozen tanks had advanced too far. For this operation, Wendorf chose the crews of Unterscharführer Owl, Oberscharführer Letsch and Hauptscharführer Höflinger. During the movement, it was ordered to remain radio silent.

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so that the British would not know ahead of time of their approach. Crews were only allowed to use internal intercom. Five "tigers" reached a large village, which was located a kilometer from the site of the alleged breakthrough of the Allied tanks. So far, the British have not shown themselves. The "Tigers" stopped near the buildings. The commanders of the hatches studied the surroundings. Barriers were visible that surrounded the village on all sides, which may have already been occupied by the Allies. The left side of the village was covered with a very dense fence. This could provide excellent cover for guns and tanks. Everything was quiet. SS-Obersturmführer Wendorf quickly developed a plan of action. He transmitted a signal that meant that even the use of intercoms in tanks should stop. At a signal, five "tigers" rushed forward at high speed. Wendorf followed in the lead, which was escorted by Höflinger's and Letsch's tanks, followed by Owl and Brandt. Wendorf was separated from the village by 200 meters. From behind the fence on the left side of the village, several flashes flickered. There were English tanks! They did not answer the first shots. The Gigers were approaching. Wendorf gave the order: "Basalt to Lötsch and Hoeflinger... Stand next to me. The goal is a hedge. Brandt, you are positioned on the right and are watching the exit from the village. "Tigers" moved so as not to stretch into a chain. Wendorf is on the move. Lotsch and Hoeflinger opened fire. The first shells hit the fence. "Gigr" Untersturmführer Owl moved slightly behind them to the left, he also opened fire on enemy tanks. Three "Tigers" swept away the fence and found two Cromwell tanks. Both were immediately shot down. They smoked. But at the same time, no infantry was seen. Suddenly, from the outskirts of the village came the roar of tanks. Gut also "Captain Brand" radioed: "Enemy tanks were destroyed at the exit of the village." Brandt got a good chance, he's one by one

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shot several Cromwells. Then came a report from Owl: "Enemy tank burned." However, it was damaged. No one was killed or wounded, but the tank's electrical system was broken. Moving quickly, Wendorff, Loetsch, and Höflinger quickly reached the center of the village, where they spotted another Cromwell on fire. After that, it became clear that there would be no more large tank groups. These three "tigers" went to the other side of the village to study the situation there. Suddenly, another Cromwell drove out of the lane onto the main street and fired at the Tiger of Oberscharführer Letsch. The tank was hit and immediately stopped. "Gank behind me, we're down. I'm in the water." The last phrase meant that the engine was damaged. the "tigers" of Wendorff and Höflinger stopped. By that time, Owl drove into the village from the other side and destroyed the Cromwell with an accurate shot from 30 meters. The turret of the English tank almost immediately flew off to the side. His intervention was just in time in this difficult situation. Further exploration of the village

showed that there were no more English infantry or tanks here. Hoefflinger took the "Tiger" Letszcz in tow. As a result, all five "tigers" returned to their original positions. This was just one of the few sorties that became commonplace in those days for the tankers of the 101st battalion.

If we talk about Wittmann himself, then he was buried under staff work. The only thing he managed to do was to break out in his English four-wheeled open armored car to the front line, where he studied the situation on the ground. This practice paid off very well during the fighting on the Eastern Front. Before each operation, Wittmann wanted to have the maximum amount of information in order to plan attacks with the utmost precision.

Those days were not without some curiosities. In races

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position of the 1st SS Panzer Corps, the party functionary Köning arrived. He was a native of the tankers. But now he was responsible for organizing the life of German soldiers on the Champs Elysees. Koning also visited the 2nd company of the 1901st battalion. He served for quite a long time in the 13th tank company under the command of Kling. During Operation Citadel, he was a loader in one of the tanks. During a meeting with former colleagues, Koenig suggested that they keep their full black uniform for the celebrations in Paris, which would be dedicated to the liquidation of the Anglo-American troops in Normandy. The fact is that the black uniform was almost never worn by tankers after 1943. They preferred overalls. But the German celebrations in Paris were not destined to come true.

After the fighting in early July 1944, most of the 101st battalion was withdrawn from the front line and located in the Grenville area, just west of Highway 158 (Can-Falaise), but at the same time one company always had to remain in the combat area. To avoid detection by allied aircraft, the "tigers" were securely hidden in the forests. The resulting respite tankers used to relieve tension from endless battles. A favorite pastime in the 2nd company was playing football. At this time, a maintenance platoon was repairing tanks. On July 13, 1944, the entire Leibstandarte was withdrawn from the front. The SS division was stationed in the vicinity of Breteville-sur-Leza. At this time, SS-Obersturmführer Hanno Raasch returned to the battalion, who immediately led the 3rd tank company he had left. Because of the burns he received during the bombing, his hands were still bandaged.

In the battalion, things went on as usual. On July 16, 1944, the anti-aircraft artillery platoon that existed at the 101st tank battalion moved immediately southeast of Caen, to the town of Le Mesnil.

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The next day, SS-Unterscharführer Warmbrunn was able to knock out three British tanks. But the respite ended very quickly. On July 18, 1944, the British offensive began, which is known under the code name Operation Goodwood. It began with the fact that a powerful blow was dealt to the German positions, which was carried out by the forces of 1596 bombers. Carpet bombing was accompanied by heavy artillery fire. After that, the British managed to break through the German line of defense in positions held by units of the 16th Luftwaffe field division. In the area of midnight, a counterattack was launched in this sector. In the area of Bourgeby, a battalion of armored personnel carriers and a battalion of Panther tanks from the Leibstandarte tank regiment were put into action. The operation was entrusted personally to Johan Peiper. The British were driven out of Frémovil, after which they were driven back to the Caen-Vimont railway line. The German counteroffensive was a real disaster for the 11th British Panzer Regiment. During these battles, he lost 126 tanks! However, the British command ordered to continue the offensive. The British troops were to capture the Caen-Falaise highway, west of Bourgeby. But in any case, the first day of Operation Goodwood ended in success in favor of the 1st Battalion of the Leibstandarte Panzer Regiment.

At the same time, the SS division "Hitler Youth" was divided into three battle groups. Kampfgruppe Wünsche operated northwest of Lyssier, Kampfgruppe Waldmüller near Pontini, an artillery regiment and an anti-aircraft artillery battalion, supported by the 272nd Infantry Division, fought on the mountain ranges west of Bourgeby. Somewhat later, Waldmüller's panzergrenadiers moved towards Kani, gradually advancing towards Emily and Frenovil. On the right flank of them, the 21st Panzer Division fought.

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A.

SS-Sturmbannführer von Westernhagen and SS-Obersturmführer Raasch planning the operation

zia. On the left is the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte. The Gigs were sent north, where they were to engage in battle on the Caen-Falaise highway in the area of Hubert-Foli-Saulier.

During the battle on July 18, 1944, Bobby Warmbrunn was able to destroy the Sherman. He hit him right under the tower. From the explosion of the shell, the tower flew high into the air, turning over several times in flight. A little later, the company commander, Obersturmführer Wendorf, moved to this "tiger", and Warmbrunn himself was to take the place of a gunner-gunner, which was a well-known thing for him. West of Foley, this combined tank crew knocked out another Sherman. But in the same battle, the "tiger" was hit right in the tank gun. The projectile could not penetrate the armor, since the "tiger" had the most powerful frontal armor. But a powerful blast wave drove the eyepiece of the sight right into Warmbrunn's eye. Wendorf immediately took him to the hospital.

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Part. Since the wound turned out to be very serious, the tanker was immediately sent to Germany to a special clinic, which was located near Berlin. The Tigers, meanwhile, were moving further west. The 3rd tank company, commanded by Obersturmführer Raash, attacked the British tanks, which were about to break through the German positions. In this battle, Raasch's tank was hit by a German anti-tank gun. Raash himself died. Wasting no time, Michael Wittmann arrived on the battlefield in his English armored car. He was beside himself with rage and anger. Raash was buried in the very place where he died by an absurd accident. He was one of the promising young tank officers. He enjoyed the respect of his subordinates, with whom, in the traditions of this unit, he was connected by warm friendships.

relatively

July 18, 1944. Wittmann plans the operation of the 101st SS Panzer Battalion

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niya. He was in his 23rd year, and until his death Raasch was the youngest tank commander in the 101st Battalion of the 1st SS Panzer Corps.

By noon on July 19, 1944, the tanks of Wünsche and the grenadier Krause (1st and 3rd battalions of the 26th regiment) moved in the direction of the advance of the Waldmüller battle group, which attacked from two sides of the road linking Wimon and Kani. Meanwhile, the battalion of armored personnel carriers, which was the backbone of Olböter's detachment (2nd battalion of the 26th regiment), was moving in the direction of Emville. Under the cover of the Waldmüller group, "tank destroyers" from the SS division "Hitler Youth", who had just arrived in Normandy, were approaching the battlefield. Now the "tigers" of the 101st battalion were deployed in the "Leibstandarte" sector. They fought right on the Caen-Falaise highway.

The British were not going to lose the strategic initiative. On July 19, 1944, after preliminary artillery preparation, they continued their offensive. The German grenadiers managed to repulse all the attacks of the British. As a result, the "tigers" from the 2nd company of the 101st battalion began to operate east of Tille-la-Campagne, in the vicinity of the town of Shisheboville. As a result, only a few British tanks managed to make any noticeable forward advance. In any case, the Germans firmly held their positions.

On July 20, 1944, units of the SS division "Hitler Youth" were withdrawn from Frenovil. They were replaced by the Leibstandarte, which was supposed to fight along the line of Bourgebie - La Houguet - Till-la Campagne. During these battles, a tank from the 2nd company was hit. Günter Boltt, loading in this carriage, lost his leg. Only the most terrible desire to survive allowed him to show superhuman abilities. He was not only able to get out of the burning tank on his own, but also crawled over rough terrain for several tens of meters with his leg torn off. Boltt himself

died the same day

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blood loss. This 19-year-old native of Königsberg during the battle in Villiers-Bocage was the loader in Wittmann's tank. Each day of fighting brought the Leibstandarte new dead and wounded. Tankers preferred not to talk about losses. Now they were not so sure of themselves - almost any of them could at any moment be buried in Normandy, wrapped in a tarpaulin.

Meanwhile, the "Tigers" of the 3rd company were fighting west of the Caen-Falaise highway, near Fernet Bouvard. British bombers tirelessly ironed the positions of the 272nd Infantry Division. The rains came to the rescue of the Germans. Non-flying weather stopped allied raids for a while.

On the evening of July 20, 1944, shocking news came from Berlin to combat units. Colonel Staufenberg made an attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler, and a coup was being prepared in Germany. By a strange coincidence, it was on July 20, 1944 that General Montgomery terminated Operation Goodwood. Despite a significant advantage in military equipment and absolute dominance in the sky, the British managed to capture only insignificant territories in the Orne region. The Germans were not going to go on the defensive. In Normandy, "tank destroyers" appeared, and the "tigers" themselves were assembled in fast, mobile groups.

## Chapter 10 THE LAST SKILL

On August 8, 1944, the 2nd company of the 101st tank battalion was still in the vicinity of Grimbose. At the same time, the 3rd company, in combat readiness, planned to meet the British on the Caen-Falaise highway near Sintje. That day there were several unpleasant incidents that began already at dawn. The first of these happened at about 6 am, when Hauptsturmführer Heurich, without receiving any order from Wittmann, headed north towards Caen with several tanks from the 3rd company. He was stopped by Höflinger, who ordered to wait for further orders.

That morning, Wittmann himself seemed unusually agitated. Around 7 o'clock in the morning, accompanied by Dr. Rabe, he first went to the headquarters, and then went to the 3rd tank company. Wittmann arrived in Sintje at about 11 o'clock. He examined his strength. For the upcoming offensive, he had eight Tigers at his disposal. After that, a meeting was held with the commander of the SS division "Hitler Youth", Oberführer Kurt "Tank"-Mayer. Mayer described the situation in the German troops and spoke about the alleged plans of the enemy. He was set to attack. For now, Wittmann's "tigers" were held in operational reserve.

At that time, the town of Sintje was under incessant Allied artillery fire, while

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I, as in the surrounding territories, was relatively calm. From the outskirts of Sintje, huge masses of Canadian tanks were visible, which occupied almost all visible space to the north of Breteville-sur-Leza. The tanks were built in tight groups. A similar picture could be observed south of Garcel and on the southeastern edges of the forest. Mayer recalled that the sight of such a tank mass took his breath away. "We could not understand the behavior of the Canadians. Why did they not let these tank armadas go on the offensive? Why did the Canadian commanders give us time to take appropriate countermeasures? There were not even bombers and attack aircraft, which we were very afraid of. The planned use of aviation could have led to the fact that nothing would be left of our 12th SS Panzer Division on Highway 158, which could be considered the "death road". And then the road to the 2nd Canadian Corps would be open. Nothing would stop the Canadians from calmly taking Falaise. Only the Almighty knows why this did not happen. It was very clear to Waldmüller and to me that we could not wait for this tank avalanche to overwhelm us. But the enemy tanks could not be allowed to advance further. On each side of the highway we were preparing to attack the enemy's tank division. We shouldn't have let them attack first - we should have seized the initiative. I decided to defend Sintje with the forces already deployed in the city and to launch a lightning attack east of the highway with all available units, which was supposed to frustrate the plans planned by the enemy. I chose the forest southeast of Garcel as my target. Since a tank attack on Sintje from the south was impossible, I was calm. We had to risk and attack in order to gain time. The start of the attack was scheduled for 12 hours 30 minutes. During the final meeting with Waldmüller and Wittmann, we could observe a lone bomber that made several

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circle over the surroundings, and then a shot of flares was fired from it. I guess the bomber was some sort of command post."

Mayer shook Wittmann's hand. He, smiling, climbed into his "tiger". It flashed through Mayer's head that after the staff work, Wittmann could once again increase his "tank score".

What were the landscapes that stretched before the "tigers"? To the right and left of the highway were farmland, mostly fields. The terrain was absolutely flat and well visible. To the south of Aeneems de Cramenil, there were approximately 6 hectares of orchards, behind them, at 250 meters, a forest strip began, which stretched parallel to

highway.

On that day, Wittmann's crew consisted of Unterscharführers Heinrich Reimers (driver), Karl Wagner (gunner). Both of them were experienced tankers who started their career in the 13th heavy tank company of the Leibstandarte and fought a lot on the Eastern Front. The radio operator was SS navigator Rudi Hirshel, who also fought in the East, and Gunther Weber was the loader. The tanks of Wittmann, Dollinger, Irion and another "tiger" (probably Kishter) were to advance on the right side of the road, while Höflinger and von Westernhagen (brother of the former battalion commander) attacked along the

May 1944. Left to right: howl side. SS-Sturmbannführer Heinz von Y

Westernhagen, SS Obersturmführer and Heinrich tank, but he became Hanno Raasch. Further to the east

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relied on the battle group Waldmüller (grenadiers), who were covered by the 1st battalion of the SS division "Hitler Youth". They were supposed to advance to the north and to the northeast.

Wittmann traditionally went on the attack first. Approximately 800 meters away, a small forest appeared, which immediately seemed very suspicious to the tankers. But as they moved forward, they couldn't keep him under constant surveillance. One of the participants in this operation recalled: "We had traveled half a kilometer when I received a radio message from Michel, which confirmed our worst fears. But then they opened fire on us from anti-tank guns, and the message from Michel was interrupted. When I looked to the left, I saw that Michel's tank was not moving. I called him on the radio, but received no answer. And then they hit my tank, there was an explosion. I gave the order to the crew to leave the car, as it was already all on fire. We darted back. I stopped to look around and to my horror found that five of our tanks had been knocked out. The turret of Michel's tank fell on the right side and almost reached the ground. Not a single crew was in sight. I climbed into von Westernhagen's tank and together with Heurich we tried to reach Michel's tank. But he couldn't even get close. Dr. Rabe tried the same thing. But everything was in vain. I can give you the exact time of the incident - 12 hours 55 minutes. The location is the Falaise-Kan Highway near Sintje.

So what happened? The village, which was directly on the course of the Wittmann group, had been occupied the night before by the 1st Kangaroo Battalion (English armored personnel carrier). It also contained the tanks of the Northhamptonshire Regiment. In addition, English troops were stationed to the north and east of the village. In addition, the Northhamptonshire yeomanry had time to prepare a defensive line south of the village. These units, which were subdivisions of the 33rd Panzer

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brigades were armed with both standard Sherman tanks and Sherman Firefly tanks. At a considerable distance, the Sherman's 75-millimeter gun was powerless against the Tiger's armor. However, the firefly (Sherman Firefly) was armed with a 76.2 mm gun. Using ammunition of the APO\$ type (Armopg Piercepe Yuissagaine Zabog), armor-piercing sub-caliber projectiles with a detachable pallet, these tanks could easily penetrate 192-mm armor from a distance of 1000 meters.

According to the combat diary of the 33rd Armored Brigade, the third platoon of the Northhamptonshire yeomanry tank "squadron" reported the approach of four "tigers" from the south. The captain ordered his subordinates to cease fire. One of the participants in these events recalled: "We ceased fire. I called for one of our four fireflies, which were armed with a 17-pounder. If I knew who was leading these "tigers" and the reputation that this tankman had, I would immediately request reinforcements.

Wittmann drove his tanks north strictly parallel to the highway. Captain Boardman described their approach: "I was surprised that the German commander led the tanks directly into the area of our fire. They were very easy targets for us. The "Tigers" turned their sides to the garden where our "squadron" was located. Now our main problem was that we understood that the guns of our Shermans could not penetrate the armor of these tanks. I believe that Wittmann expected possible resistance on the left flank, in the region of Breteville-sur-Leza. ,

It is difficult to say what plan Michael Wittmann hatched. It can be said with a high degree of probability that the strip of forest and gardens on the right side caused him considerable anxiety, since they could become a shelter for anti-tank guns, which he was very afraid of. In any case, the Tigers continued to drive north on both sides of the highway towards their intended destination.

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The last photo of Wittmann. You can see his tension.

target. At that moment, Wittmann did not yet know that his opponent was following the movement of German tanks. At 1240 hours, Captain Boardman gave the order to Sergeant Gordon to open fire. At this moment, the "tigers" were at a distance of 700 meters. The gunner of the well-camouflaged firefly was Joe Ekins, who fired several shots. According to him

he allegedly knocked out three German tanks. The crews of the "Tigers" were not able to calculate the sheltered "Sherman". The German tankers were not even sure who was firing at them. This is evidenced by the words of the team of Haupt Scharführer Höflinger, which he uttered after Wittmann's tank was knocked out: "Attention! Anti-tank guns on the right! Back"

The second "Tiger" that Ekins followed was able to calculate the location of the "Sherman". As a result, the Germans turned to the right and fired several shots. The Sherman tried to change position to take cover from the Tiger's fire. But one German shell still hit

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to the tower. Sergeant Gordon was wounded. The tank was commanded by Lieutenant James. At 12 hours 47 minutes gunner Ekins could knock out the second "Tiger". The closest of the "Tigers" managed to shoot at the "Sherman". But the "German" had a broken caterpillar, and he began to circle in place. At 12 hours 52 minutes, Ekins knocked him out too.

It is curious that the British military speaks of only three lined "tigers", although two more combat vehicles were destroyed in that battle. The fourth "Tiger" was destroyed just north, southwest of Kramesnil. The fifth "Tiger" was hit on the other side of the highway.

For a long time, no one wanted to believe in the fact that Wittmann was dead. Dr. Rabe repeatedly tried to get to the wrecked tank, in the hope that there were still living people. But each time he fell under a hurricane of fire, eventually abandoning his idea. In the evening, when Wittmann did not return from the attack, Obersturmbannführer Wunsche ordered a search for him. Untersturmführer Horst Borgsmüller, who served at the headquarters of a tank regiment, recalled: "I was ordered to look for Wittmann and his crew on the right side of highway 158. My driver, navigator Klein, and I began to move in this direction. The darkness was thickening, and I could not really make out anything. After some time, machine-gun fire was opened on us. The search on the front line in such conditions was fruitless. I heard from our grenadiers that the "tigers" were hit by anti-tank guns to the right of the highway. Obersturmführer Wendorf could not tell me anything concrete either. By order of Hauptsturmführer Iseke, I set off at night in search of Cranville. The command post of Obersturmbannführer Monck was located there. I made the last attempts, but the enemy was already near.

Uncertainty about the fate of Wittmann had a negative impact on the morale of the tankers. Hauptsturmführer Konrad, who served in the 2nd company, recalled: "It was a very difficult

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battle. We had to retreat, but our Hauptsturmführer could not. We left him on the battlefield. Evacuation was impossible, as the enemy was very strong and he almost reached the psdbit tank. We had to pick him up. It didn't fit in our head that Michael Wittmann was no longer with us."

Or another passage from the memoirs of Hauptscharführer Konrad: "Our company was struck like thunder by the news that our beloved Hauptsturmführer had disappeared. We still continued to hope that he was alive, and simply was taken prisoner by the British. Such hopes gave rise to the most baseless rumors. The same Conrad recalled: "The Oberscharführer, who had just returned from the hospital, claimed that he was listening to the "transmitter of the Calais soldiers" (English military wave), who was informed that our Hauptsturmführer was wounded and taken prisoner by the British. But I believe that this information is not confirmed by anything. So don't try too hard  
strong hopes.

However, Wittmann's colleagues, like drowning men, tried to grasp any straw of hope. There were suspicions that Unterscharführer Heinrich "Hein" Reimers, who had been the driver in Wittmann's carriage on 8 August 1944, had fallen into the hands of British soldiers. IN

a telegram dated 16 August 1944 referred to Wittmann as missing. The same wording was put in his personal file.

"I was amazed that Frau Wittmann considered her husband missing, especially since I personally visited her to say that her husband died a hero's death on August 8, 1944," recalled Heinz von Westernhagen. Oka

Wittmann shortly before his death

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The battalion commander, who was undergoing treatment, was one of the first to receive this news in Germany. He found Michael Wittmann's wife in Erbstorf and broke the bad news.

The news of Wittmann's death spread like wildfire throughout the 1st SS Panzer Corps. The tankers expressed their sincere grief. The headquarters of the 101st battalion at that time was in a small Norman house. They could not yet fully comprehend the fact that Wittmann had been killed. In the history of the Leibstandarte heavy tank battalion, August 8, 1944 was one of the darkest days in the history of the division.

Walter Lau, an artilleryman in the crew of Obersturmführer Wendorf, wrote of the events of August 8, 1944: "We set out at dawn on August 8, when it was still dark. The infantry has arrived to relieve us. A powerful artillery shelling began. And we still had to drive one and a half kilometers to the rear in order to reach the trucks with fuel. We ended up rolling 200-litre barrels straight into the trench, where we hurriedly covered them. We were afraid that a shell would hit them and they would all fly into the air. However, this time everything worked out. Although with difficulty, we refueled our tanks. The morning was still going on, we started the engines and sent in the direction of Grimboise. Since we were well acquainted with the landscape on both sides of the Orne, we had a rough idea where the enemy could dig in. We fired several shots to show Tommy that we knew where they were hiding. Suddenly we were shocked by a powerful blow, which was accompanied by a deafening explosion. The "Tiger" rolled a few more meters due to inertia from the hit of an enemy shell. Motor stalled. Dead silence. Are we on fire? Should we leave the car? What is the right thing to do in this situation? We soon decided that we didn't need outside help. But we did not succeed in getting the "tiger" to move. Obersturmführer Wen

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dorf gave the order to another "tiger" to take us in tow. The loader and the gunner from another tank, which was behind us, connected our vehicles with strong cables, which were secured with heavy bolts. And then it happened. Near the loader Paul Sumnich, my friend from Pomerania, a shell exploded. Both of his legs were instantly torn off. We picked up our seriously wounded comrade. We pulled over his terrible wounds and decided that it was best to wait for medical help at the evacuation point. At first we towed the tank at high speed. We soon reached the road, where we refueled at dawn under fire. "Tigers" of the 2nd company gathered on this road. Obersturmführer Wendorf puzzled another undamaged Tiger. I well remember his words, how he asked me and our driver Fran Elmer: "So, which of the giants is with me" (that was my name, because I ideally fit the external criteria of the "Leib standard"). Of course, we were glad, and all three went to the "Tiger" fit for battle. I believe it was a tank from 3rd Platoon 232 or 233. The radio operator Hubert Heil was wounded and we were delayed. But this stop along the way will forever remain in my memory. Because that's when we got the bad news. With tears in his eyes and a tremor in his voice, Bubi Wendorff said: "Michel Wittmann was killed." Then Wendorff was told the version that during the attack of several "tigers" Wittmann was under a hail of shells and that nothing was left of his tank and crew. The day was oppressive. Booby Wendorff didn't say a word." After the events of July 20, 1944, when numerous rumors spread throughout the army, the morale of the tankers was significantly undermined.

The myth about Michael Wittmann, which took shape in the first half of 1944, did not disappear with his death. He continues to live. This is evidenced at least by the fact that there are several legends around his death.

Legend 1. Wittmann died near Falaise in battle with the Shermans of the 4th Canadian Panzer Division. WITH dis

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The grave of the crew of Michael Wittmann in Normandy

At 1800 m, he knocked out two Shermans from the 1st Squadron. To break the line of the attackers, Wittmann's "Tiger" rushed forward, knocked out another "Sherman", but immediately received five hits at close range. Three shells pierced the tower, the entire crew died.

Legend 2. Wittmann's tank was destroyed by the 1st Polish Tank Brigade of General S. Maczek. A description of the same battle appears in the current Polish press, but only Wittmann's "Tiger" is knocked out by "Shermans" of the 2nd Squadron of the 2nd Tank Regiment of the 1st Polish Tank Division.

Legend 3. Wittmann's "Tiger" was destroyed by an air bomb. Allegedly, the remains of the "Tiger" 007, on which Wittmann died, were found. According to this version, the tank is not

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got no holes. The only damage was a large hole in the back of the hull, next to the engine. It was concluded that the damage had been inflicted from the air. The missile hit the rear wall of the hull (armor thickness - 25 mm), pierced the air intakes and exploded. This caused an explosion in the engine compartment and in the fighting compartment, where the ammunition detonated. The explosion of flying shells destroyed the crew and blew off the turret. As a variation of the version, Wittmann's "Tiger" was destroyed by a missile launched from an attack aircraft of the Royal Air Force - "Typhoon". As proof of these versions, two photographs of the "tiger" without a turret with a gun barrel lying on the hull were presented. In fact, it turned out that both photographs depict the "tiger" of SS Untersturmführer Alfred Günther, which was actually destroyed as a result of an air bomb.

For almost 40 years, Michael Wittmann was considered missing. In 1987, a French highway service working on widening a stretch of road near Sintje came upon an unmarked grave. According to the records of the dentist's card, the remains of Michael Wittmann and his driver Heinrich Reimers were identified. After that, Wittmann and his crew were officially reburied at the German military cemetery "De la Cambet", where 21,500 German soldiers who died in Normandy are buried. Michael Wittmann is buried in square no. 47, row no. 3, grave no. 120.

## AFTERWORD

Michael Wittmann became the living embodiment of a modern officer who did not distance himself from his people, but, maintaining friendly relations with them, shared his fate with non-commissioned officers and soldiers. He himself went a long way from a simple infantryman to the most successful tank officer of World War II. Warm relations with his subordinates did not prevent Wittmann from being a responsible officer. It was for this reason that he turned down an offer to teach at a tank school and returned to Normandy. It is for this reason, with the words "I must be with them", he rushed into his last fight.

Throughout his not very long, but bright life, Michael Wittmann showed that he was not looking for a nickname for himself.

Wittmann plays with a squirrel

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Wittmann talks with the designers of the "Tiger"

some awards and privileges. He was absolutely immune to flattery. In many ways he was an extraordinary man and an exceptional soldier. He never adhered to established forms. Military-tactical clichés were alien to him. Despite his low birth and the difficult years of his youth, Michael Wittmann grew up to be a highly educated and versatile person. Any respite he used to replenish his knowledge. He read a lot, and perceived a lot from the reality around him. To strangers, Wittmann seemed withdrawn, but by no means timid. There is no doubt that this illustrious tanker was an idealist who strictly followed the moral codes set for himself and demanded the same from his subordinates. He was an excellent officer, not only because of his tactical abilities, but also because he considered his own

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an integral task of educating young soldiers. He felt responsible for their fate. The soldiers responded to him with love, which not every officer managed to win in the war. Wittmann's subordinates considered him an incorrigible optimist. He never lost his head. He kept his composure even during the heavy fighting of 1943-1944. Wittmann believed that a correct assessment of the situation could be the key to success in any situation. All his tactical successes were the result of hard work. He was not "lucky", but, as we would say now, he was a "workaholic". He was a scout, a tanker and a tactical theorist rolled into one. Naturally, all this had to be multiplied by his natural abilities. Many noted that it took him seconds to make the right decision. However, he never underestimated his opponents. Like a real soldier, he treated them with a certain respect. The results of many battles showed that Wittmann was the type that could be called an individualist warrior. He put an end to the famous proverb: "One in the field is not a warrior." He was able to achieve all his most amazing results precisely when he fought alone against several tanks. We can say that he perfectly used his "tiger". In some situations, it seemed that this formidable combat vehicle simply could not fulfill the combat mission that Wittmann "entrusted" to it. Many attributed Wittmann's successes to his military talents, which bordered on almost genius. This is an erroneous opinion. His innate abilities could hardly have led to such a stunning result if he had not had years of hostilities behind him, and he himself was not prone to extremely careful planning. Wittmann's example is doubly surprising in that he did not let natural inclinations shape his character. As a native of Bavaria, known for its weight

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With savory feasts and a penchant for cheerful drinks, Wittmann was indifferent to alcohol. He avoided noisy parties, which, at least occasionally, but happened during the war. In these situations, he preferred to spend his free time on recreation. There was nothing familiar in his friendly relations with the soldiers. He was always ready to support them, SS-Uttsturmführer Michael | Wittmann is the most successful tank cheer, but he never cracked a shady joke as a World War II commander.

At least one fact speaks of his moral qualities: during his meteoric rise, when in just six months he turned from a good tank officer into the best tanker in Germany (and, by and large, into the best tanker in all military history), he did not become arrogant, he did not put himself above everyone else. Many officers of the "Leibstandarte" were surprised when they saw how the holder of the Knight's Cross, together with his tankmen, was repairing his "Tiger" knee-deep in mud. He was not a stranger to such work even when, one after the other, after the Knight's Cross, he received Oak Leaves for him, and then Swords. He could not leave his unit even when he got into the military elite, and his name was known not only in Germany, but also abroad. He did

duty is the meaning of his life, which allows us now to talk about Michael Wittmann as the greatest tanker of the Second World War.

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He was called "the fearless knight of the Reich."

He was hailed as the best tank ace of World War II.

He was extolled by Goebbels propaganda. Legends told of his exploits.

Until now, Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann is considered the most productive tanker in history - according to  
official data, in three years he destroyed 138 enemy tanks and 132 artillery pieces.

However, many details of his real biography are still not known. Only one successful battle of  
Wittmann is accurately documented, near Villiers-Bocham on June 13, 1944,

when his "Tiger" defeated the British column, knocking out about 20 enemy tanks and armored vehicles in a matter of minutes. The circumstances of Wittmann's death are not fully clarified either - there are several mutually exclusive versions of his death. For almost 40 years, its crew was considered missing - the remains were discovered and identified only in 1983 ...

This book is the first Russian biography of the famous tank ace, a detailed account of his military career from a simple gunner to the commander of a heavy tank company. Having studied all the available literature, analyzed contradictory information and eyewitness accounts, and reviewed the list of battles and victories, the author exposes numerous myths about "the best tankerman of all times and peoples" that were formed during Wittmann's lifetime and surround his name after his death, up to the present day.

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